

PC GAMER

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INSIDE

- Hands-on: **StarCraft II**
- Unveiled: **Supreme Commander 2**
- Reviewed: **The Sims 3**

+ Aliens vs. Predator • R.U.S.E. • OnLive impressions
Red Orchestra 2 • The end of DRM? • Brontosaurus-giraffes?

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

SKEPTIC TANK

Used to be that everyone's a critic. These days, however, it seems that everyone's a skeptic.

I'm not talking about the sad state of our economy, or our near-universal disillusionment with both government and corporate interests. Truth told, I don't have much time for "politics," or "current events," or anything else the rest of the world deems "important."

I'm talking about the one thing that matters to anyone bothering to read this page: games.

Now, it must be said that gamers have always been a skeptical lot, and we PC gamers have a proud tradition of being the most skeptical of them all. It's a manner of thinking that we cherish—although, to our credit, we're always delighted to be proven wrong. After all, a great game is a great game, and great hardware is great hardware, and great people use skepticism as a starting point, not as the final verdict on an unreleased product.

It's with that in mind that I set aside my skepticism to check out

this month's coverstar, *BioShock 2*. When we first heard whispers of a multiplayer component, PCG Central was abuzz with conflicting emotional responses. Cool...but *really*? Arguably the best game of 2007 (it was actually PCG's runner-up for that year, just behind *Crysis*), *BioShock* was such a focused single-player game that we couldn't help but worry: Would the multiplayer water down the solo experience by siphoning off sorely needed resources for an unnecessary addition? Would it detract from the serious tone of the game with a mélange of misguided modes?

It's a sentiment the dev team was well aware of—and ready to challenge head-on. I came away convinced of the potential here. See for yourself if you agree after reading our world exclusive feature.

GARY

GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Top 7 Things Gary Is Still Skeptical About This Month

1 OnLive. I actually think it can work, but not at a price that'll appeal to the mass market they're seeking. (p.18)

2 DRM. It's not a deterrent, and it just pisses off people who legally buy games. (p.14)

3 Time management. I never got into *The Sims*. But after reading Dan's review, I wonder if this is finally the one to win me over—and what that'll mean for my free time. (p.69)



4 Time management, Part II. Will *R.U.S.E.* be my gateway drug into strategy gaming? If so, that would also be very bad news for my precious free time. (p.16)

5 Fish guns. I thought those might be the greatest weapons ever, but then Evan turned me on to squirrel bombs. (p.78)

6 Braid. Wonderful concept—totally agree with our review—but the control is a bit fiddly for my personal tastes. (p.80)

7 Mushrooms. They're fungus. Stop eating them, people. Gross.

THE PLAYLIST 0709

GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF



To prepare for this month's coverstory, Gary reinstalled the original *BioShock* and played it for a few hours. But then he got scared, and fled to the charming comfort of vegetal defense forces in the epic *Plants vs. Zombies*.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR



Survival mode shoved *F.E.A.R. 2*, *GTA IV*, *X-COM: UFO Defense*, *Plants vs. Zombies*, *Mirror's Edge* (still) and *A Vampire Story* out of the way to make room for yet another month of *Left 4 Dead*. So be it.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR



Barely a night has passed in recent weeks where Dan hasn't been playing both *Demigod* and *Left 4 Dead's* new Survival mode. Just think: At this point in most years we're trapped in the slow season.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Demigodding with Dan and Josh continues to be Evan's evening staple. He favors the Rook's passive ability set: equip shoulder-mounted archers, a trebuchet hat and defense towers, and his foes basically slay themselves.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER



Summer's here, which means Fitz gets to dust off his extensive collection of masculine short-pants and gladiator sandals. Which is all in preparation for the only game worth playing: kicking editor butt when they cross him.

JOSH AUGUSTINE EPIC INTERN



After weeks of achievement hoarding, Josh finally unlocked the übersaw on his Medic in *TF2* and is now stabbing spies in the face and übering Heavies on capture points more efficiently than ever. Cut, cut, über!

MUSHROOM BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/INYANG



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LETTERS

Don't give us your tired, your poor, or your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, and especially not the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Just send us your letters and awesome or strange screenshots to letters@pcgamer.com.

WIN!



THE SIMS 3!

Two pieces of great news: We've got 10 copies of EA's *The Sims 3* to give away to readers, and the Geneva Convention treaties do not apply to virtual people! Just email contests@pcgamer.com with "whyareyou-doingthis" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends July 10, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

JOIN UP!

Sometimes, reader feedback is best expressed with painful rockets, chaingun fire, or sticky grenades delivered directly to our faces. To this end, we invite *Team Fortress 2* fans to compete with us and fellow PC Gamer readers on our official server. Find us at the IP 66.151.138.34:27015, and beware Josh's timely Kritzkreigs.



10th Mountain Division 1-87 Infantry recon scout "Predators" Sgts. Barr, Pickett, Knight and Wellnitz playing *Call of Duty 4* at FOB McHenry, Iraq.

FIGHTING WORDS

As the mother of a soldier who recently completed his second deployment to Iraq, I was touched by the letter from Oliver Givan ("Second Thoughts," April 2009). Mr. Givan was bothered by the realism of *Call of Duty 4* and wondered "Is it right to make games out of events that have caused such destruction and taken the lives of countless loved ones?"

When *CoD4* was released, my son had just landed back in Iraq. I could not bring myself to buy

the game, as much as I loved every *CoD* before it (as well as the *Medal of Honor*, *Brothers in Arms*, and other franchises based on real wars). Then my son came home for two weeks in early 2008 and asked if I'd played *CoD4: Modern Warfare* yet. I answered truthfully that I hadn't, and told him why. He gave me a look that said "you are so lame" and proceeded to tell me how much they played the Xbox 360 version (PC gaming is almost impossible for deployed military thanks to DRM) at his forward

operating base in northern Iraq. They actually used it to practice squad tactics, and often played it wearing nightvision gear. Before my son headed back to Iraq, he purchased *CoD4* for me as a birthday present. As I played it in the coming months, I actually felt closer to him. I'm thoroughly addicted to *CoD4* deathmatching, though I won't play as the opposition for obvious reasons.

I've included a photo of my son, two of his fellow scout snipers, and squad medic enjoying some *CoD4*. JEAN BAILEY

NEVER SAY NEVER

I just purchased and downloaded *Far Cry 2* on Steam. The game requires a serial number that's supposed to be in the manual, but my Steam copy didn't come with a manual.

You can't talk to a live person at Valve for a Steam issue; you can only email a question.

I have submitted several requests for assistance, and here we are 24 hours later and I have yet to receive a response. The only place in the world that has worse service than this is a

Turkish prison. I will *never* buy another game online—*ever*!

DECKERDALLAS
(NO RELATION TO
YOU-KNOW-WHO)

Right-click on *Far Cry 2* in your Steam My Games window and select "View Game CD Key." You can solve many setup problems by selecting "Technical support page" from the Steam Help menu and entering the name of your game in the search box. It's not the same as speaking to a live person, but it can often solve problems faster and less expensively than a call center could.

IT PAYS TO DELAY

I don't know what the consensus is in the PC Gamer office, but my biggest pet peeve with games is perpetually tumbling release dates. I've been waiting for *Battlefield Heroes* since August of 2008, and it just keeps getting pushed back over and over. Why must developers make so many false promises? SHAZBOT

It actually costs publishers and developers a ton of money to postpone the release of a game, so it's not something that's ever done

frivolously. Although release dates are sometimes changed for reasons not directly related to the game—such as moving the date away from the release date of a competing game—most of the time, release dates get pushed ahead so that the developer has more time to iron out the bugs. In a rare and startling moment of consensus, the staff of PC Gamer unanimously agrees that we'd rather wait for a finished game than a patch.

PLEASE SIR, MAY WE HAVE ANOTHER?

Last month Dan Stapleton mentioned several games that should be made into sequels—how about doing an article telling the game studios what sequels you want? I would love to see more *X-Wing*/*TIE Fighter* or *MechWarrior* games. JASON

Generally, if a game sold well, developers don't need much encouragement to make a sequel. Even games that didn't sell well initially—like Michel Ancel's superb *Beyond Good & Evil*—can build up enough of a fan base over the years to eventually support a sequel. So we're actually surprised (and delighted) to see so many publishers taking a chance on original games like *Mirror's Edge*, *Dead Space*, and *R.U.S.E.* Not that we wouldn't welcome, of course, sequels to *Psychonauts*, *Prey*, and another chapter of *Wing Commander* and *No One Lives Forever*.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

I hope that I am not alone in enjoying the "Classic Games Club" section. I went out and jumped on the dollar-off deal from GOG.com—and I plan to spend the money I save on part of a cup of coffee.

SCOTT FLORENCE

TMI

Don't ever stop making *PC Gamer*. Trying to keep a laptop from sliding off your knees while on the can is just impractical. This is where *PC Gamer* comes in. Thank you for making such a fine magazine.

NICK CRASE

THE HIVE MIND



PC Gamer fans—as well as a few ex-PC Gamer fans—continue to stuff the PC Gamer inbox with their thoughts on the new look of the magazine. Of course, we can't print all the letters, so we turn instead to the miracle of modern technology: By running a month's worth of feedback through software, we're able to create a "word cloud" that displays the top 100 words from the combined letters in sizes proportional to their frequency. Then, after seeing the results, we removed words like "a" and "the" and the F-word, and ran it through the software again.

WARGS VS. BOARS

After the birth of my daughter (and future PC gamer) in March, I finally had a chance to catch up on your great magazine. I was reading it out loud to the young one when I came across the caption at the bottom of the *LotRO* story (April, page 42) that reads "They call me the 'Boar Whisperer.'" That my friends, is a Warg (evil wolves sometimes ridden by goblins) and not a Boar! Though I love your magazine, I would hate for my

little girl to grow up with incorrect *LotRO* mythology. MARTIN AND KEENA

You're right, Martin, the screenshot does indeed depict a Warg, and we apologize for the error. But we'd like to turn this embarrassing blunder into a learning opportunity for some of our younger readers by highlighting the major differences between Wargs, Boars and Bjorn, the unicorn from *Peggle*.

WARGS (WILD WOLVES)	BOARS (SUS SCROFA)	BJORN (THE UNICORN)
Cute little wet noses	Monster double-barreled snout	Prominent horn on forehead
Bites down with teeth	Slashes upward with tusks	Defecates rainbows
Princely mane	Bristly fur ideal for brushes	'80s blow-dry
Long legs and broad paws	Short legs, stumpy hooves	Spangly boots (weekends)
Players look badass riding one	Players look ridiculous riding one	Takes a special kind of player to ride one

BOAR PHOTO BY LEE PRUITT

I don't know what the consensus is in the PC Gamer office, but my biggest pet peeve with games is perpetually tumbling release dates. Why must developers make so many false promises?



ALIENS vs PREDATOR

HUNGRY FOR MORE ALIEN-ON-OTHER-ALIEN ACTION? WE REPORT ON THE LONG-AWAITED RETURN OF A PC GAMING CLASSIC.

The Predator and the Aliens have the munchies. As humans, we're the lunchboxes with legs. Deal with it. That's the grim premise behind the *Aliens vs. Predator* games, resurrected this year by series veterans Rebellion.

In this third outing (as in the first), you have control of three characters: a human marine, a Predator and an Alien. All offer different perspectives on the same story: the Weyland-Yutani Corporation's continued hunt for anything related to the titular extra-terrestrials, and their not-at-all-coincidental excavation of an ancient ruin on a freshly colonized world. Cue facehuggers. And screaming.

Each character type has asymmetric weapons and abilities. Playing as the marine you'll rely on your motion tracker, pulse rifle, smart gun and a backpack full of flares (for lighting the horrific darkness). Predators, meanwhile, chuck spears and dismember their prey from the shadows. Aliens are just

as nuanced: they are their weapon. For them, a kill is as much about getting to the right place before you strike, as it is about the strike itself.

This isn't what I meant by "get some tail."



For Tim Jones, head of art and design on the new project (and a veteran of the first *AvP* game), success relies on confounding player expectations—a lesson learned from the original. "The ability to experience the game from three genuinely different perspectives was—and still is—a fresh and compelling connect. I believe the original *AvP* succeeded because it captured the atmosphere of the original *Alien* and *Predator* movies. The authentic sound effects and dynamic lighting contributed to an oppressive and claustrophobic mood."

Jones can't control his enthusiasm for the astonishing feats possible in that first game, and in this one. "As a marine, amid the horror, the cathartic pleasure of blowing an Alien to pieces in a shower of acid blood. But it could all end so abruptly at any moment with the inhuman scream of a facehugger clamping itself to your face. People still tell vivid stories of how they literally jumped out of their chair when that happened."

Nevertheless, gaming in 2009 is a very dif-

Play as the marines and your mates become lunch.

ferent scene than what it was in 2000. The visual quality gamers expect is extraordinary. We're harder to scare. We expect cinema-quality campaigns and astonishing big-budget action sequences. And that's fine. Based on the screens you're looking at, we're confident that Rebellion has got that all in hand.

Jones explains what their technology enables them to do. "In addition to the obvious visual fidelity that is now possible, the marine player can expect to fight alongside other marines during dramatic sequences in the game narrative. The Predator has the ability to leap confidently through the trees and across rooftops. The Alien will really be able to see the terror in the faces of its prey before it tears them apart..."

Yet there's still a question mark hanging over any new *AvP* game: hasn't Hollywood destroyed the franchise with a series of abysmal sci-fi flicks?

Jones doesn't outright condemn the films, but he does explain that his game won't be inspired by these shoddy film efforts. "The *AvP* games have always keyed off the original *Alien* and *Predator* movies, and I think the fans are hungry for a face-off set far away from Earth, where the story isn't constrained by the realities of movie budgets."

And we want to create our own face-offs in multiplayer. While Jones won't give details, he does promise that we'll be able to take on each of the three roles in at least death-match. "No other game allows such distinctly different species to go head-to-head. It's an absolute blast." **TIM EDWARDS**

In the event of a flat tire, do not seek assistance from alien assassins.



VITALS ■ PUBLISHER Sega
DEVELOPER Rebellion
RELEASE 2010
LINK www.rebellion.com

DRM in Retreat

ARE THE DAYS OF ROOTKITS, INSTALL LIMITS, AND HEAVY-HANDED COPY PROTECTION NUMBERED?

"I personally don't like DRM. It interrupts the user experience. We would like to get around that. But there is this problem called piracy out there."

That was EA CEO John Riccitiello, as reported by Yahoo, addressing the backlash against the three-installation limit placed on each copy of *Spore*. The policy was later changed, but not before *Spore*'s ratings on Amazon took a severe beating as a result of the initial decision.

In hindsight, it seems inevitable: By pairing up one of the most high-profile PC game launches of the year with one of the most restrictive policies ever imposed on a game, the publisher made *Spore* a prime target for the mounting backlash against increasingly heavy-handed digital rights management schemes—including ones that had never been associated with EA.

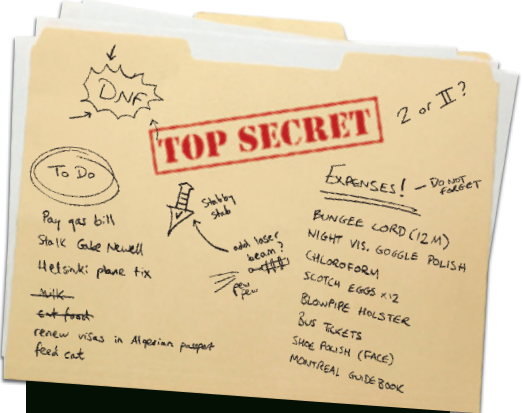
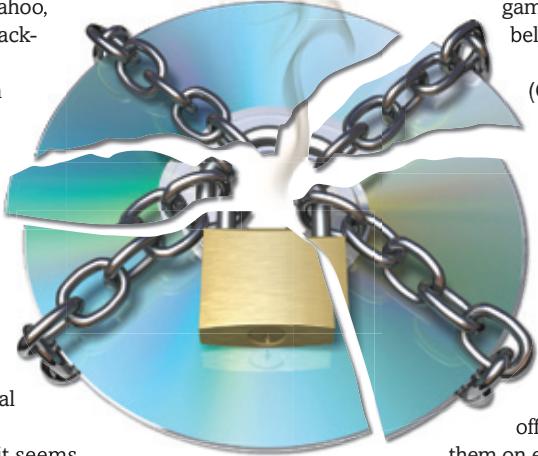
SPORE WENT ON TO be heavily pirated and sell a bazillion copies. Whether or not it would have sold more copies had piracy not been an option is open for nerdy debate, but the controversy may have reminded publishers that alienating gamers also affects their bottom line. Less than a year later, there are signs that the protect-at-all-costs attitude may be on its way out, and that publishers are either choosing to tolerate minor piracy in exchange for a better "user experience,"

as EA is doing by releasing *The Sims 3* with only the classic serial number and CD check combo for protection, or, in the case of Stardock and Valve, coming up with new DRM technologies that are transparent, minimally obtrusive, and confer some benefit to gamers (see the chart below).

Valve's CEG (Custom Executable Generation), already available to developers, generates "unique copies" of each game for everybody who downloads it. You can drop your copy onto a USB key and install it on all 400 of your office PCs and play them on each one by logging into your Steam account. The catch is that you can log onto Steam from only one machine at a time, and you cannot transfer or sell your games to another party.

Stardock's Goo (Game Object Obfuscation), which launched in April and is now also available to devs, works in a similar manner, but is even more laid back than CEG. It wraps the game and Stardock's Impulse Reactor platform app into a single executable that's associated with a serial number and your email address. Once you install the game on a PC and activate it, you'll never need to log on to play again. You can even sell your games—but at this time, *only back to the original publisher*, and at a price set by that publisher.

None of these solutions are perfect for either gamers or developers, but they do represent a gradual acknowledgment by the PC gaming industry that its DRM pit bulls have mauled a few gamers too many.



the spy

Not content with reviving the PC gaming classic *Deus Ex*, it seems Eidos Montreal is also working on resurrecting the *Thief* series. The developer's website has been updated with an announcement that its second project will be revealed soon, in a very *Thief*-like font that pretty much gives the game away, especially when the developer has already hinted that its next game would be an Eidos classic beginning with the letter "T." **Alrighty then.** The Spy only hopes that the developer won't revisit the short-lived plan abandoned years ago to move the franchise into the near-future or present and do away with the main character, well, *thieving*.

The Spy is following an interesting twist in the making of the *Fallout MMO*. Back when Bethesda purchased the *Fallout* series from Interplay, the contract gave Interplay a couple of years to attempt to create *Fallout Online*. Interplay received funding, and has recently contracted Masthead studios, makers of the soon-to-be-released MMO *Earthrise*. Masthead is now working on a game called **Project: V13**, which might as well be called *Fallout Online*, *Nudge Nudge*. But a restless Bethesda appears eager to cancel the trademark agreement they set up. In a legal filing Interplay wrote that it "recently received notice that Bethesda intends to terminate the trademark license agreement between Bethesda and Interplay." Interplay seems ready to fight.

Finally, what could they be up to at **Crytek**? The dev has registered a few names: "Gface," "Carvatar" and "Kingdoms." "Gface" sounds more like a bit of game engine technology to The Spy, although Crytek's registered "Warface" as well. "Carvatar" suggests a vehicle-based game in Crytek's future, and as for "Kingdoms," The Spy is aware that the German developer is interested in making a medieval action game. In fact, it's displayed a show reel for **CryEngine 3** showing a castle under attack. Spy out.

The Gamer's Guide to Kinder, Gentler, Cuddlier DRM

	Valve	Stardock	EA
DRM	CEG	GOO	Serial + CD check
What it does	Encrypts executable	Encrypts game	Checks for media
What it requires	Login to Steam	One-time login to Impulse Reactor	One-time CD key entry; game disc
What it allows	Unlimited installs	Unlimited installs; resale to publisher	Unlimited installs; resale; nostalgia
Uh-oh	Activation server; no transfer or resale	Activation server; publisher sets resale price	EA: "This copy-protection strategy is specific to <i>The Sims 3</i> "

R.U.S.E.

UBISOFT GOES ALL-IN WITH AN INNOVATIVE NEW RTS

In 2010, Ubisoft will announce a strategy game that utilizes an innovative smell-controlled device to read input directly from your nose. You'll command entire platoons with a twitch of your olfactory system: a sniffle would build power plants; a flared nostril could assign control groups; sneezes deploy nukes (you may want to rebind that one).

Making a push into the strategy genre by doing something different is a goal we're happy to back with our war bonds. Even if you found Ubisoft's voice-controlled RTS, *EndWar*, to be a fancy but flawed gimmick (much like our imaginary nasal RTS), it could encourage devs to take new approaches to the genre. For now, that's *R.U.S.E.*—an RTS flush with new concepts that seem very conducive to core and casual players alike.

The pitch? Massive-scaled WWII poker that relies on deception as a key gameplay mechanic, rendered by a free-zooming 3D engine that builds immersion better than any strategy game we've ever seen. If *EndWar* was the ears, *R.U.S.E.* is the eyes. French studio Eugen Systems spent years developing the "IrisZoom" engine that guides the game, which Senior Producer Mathieu Girard says they needed to bring "dimension" to the experience, calling IrisZoom the tool for supporting Eugen's

The pitch? Massive-scaled WWII poker that relies on deception as a key gameplay mechanic.

deception-centered gameplay. At the core of this is how IrisZoom manages information in real time.

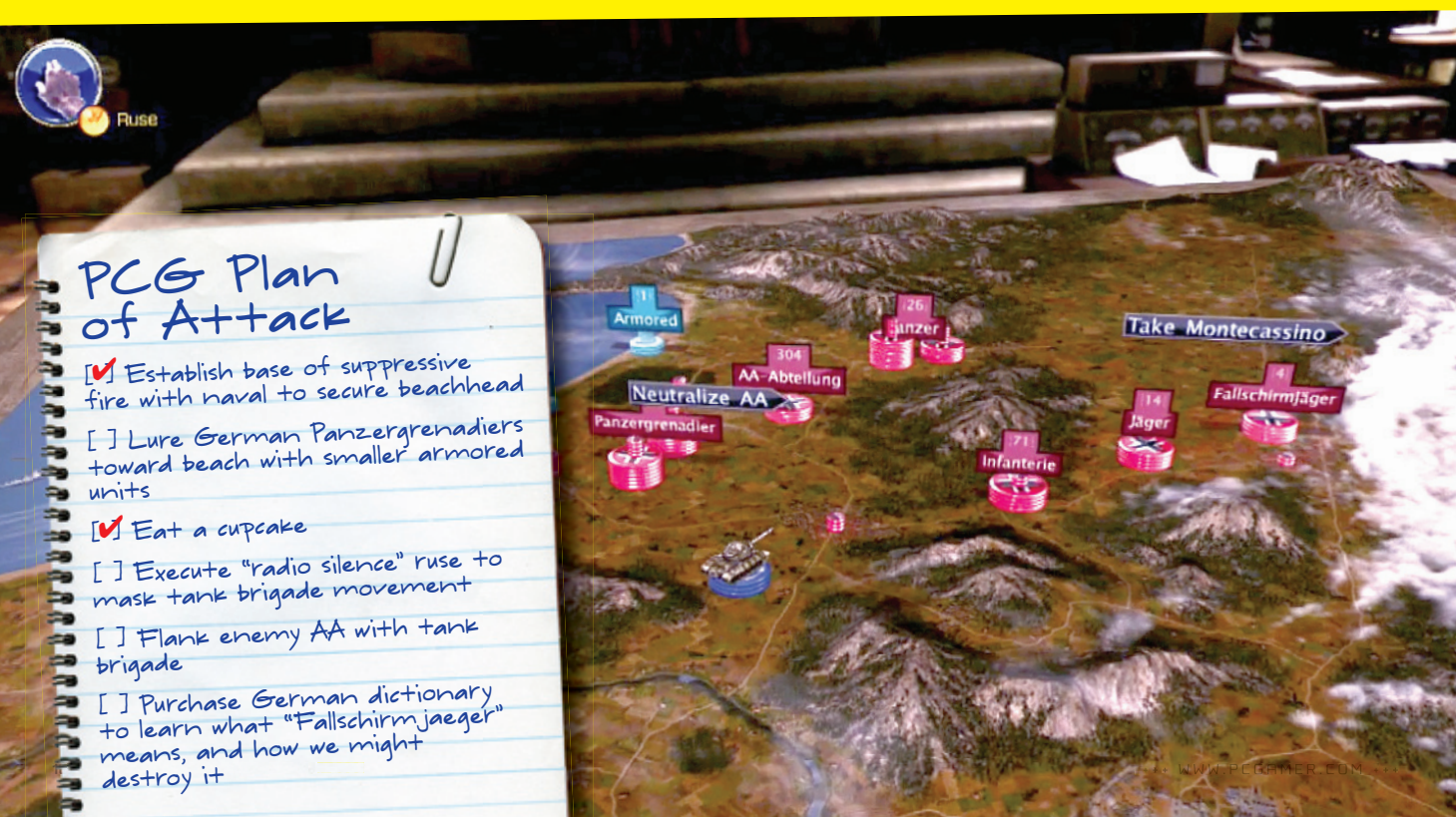
"In the usual RTS, you have this fog hiding the visibility of the map and impeding your ability to see your enemies until you explore the terrain," says Girard. "We have a different approach—there is no fog of war, but there is partial information. All the units are visible per default, represented by tokens. But you don't know exactly what kind of unit it is until you send some recon units. It can be tanks, it can be infantry, it can even be fake units. So, like in Texas Hold 'em, you

have a flop—common information shared by all the participants of the battle—but you have to work with probability and play with uncertainty, trying to bet on the 'cards' of your opponents while bluffing them with your strategy."

So not only does IrisZoom's freedom of movement remove the need for HUD clutter, it builds a foundation for strategic thinking and deception by representing unit type and strength *dynamically* dependent on your zoom. Reel back to a wide angle, and watch a tank division merge into a stack of red "chips," topped by a Panzer; bring the cam back to cloud-level, and they'll split into individual, smaller stacks; zoom in to ground level and they'll morph into individual tanks. At maximum distance, you can see *R.U.S.E.* rendered in real-time on a command center table (see below screen)—framing it this way makes it feel like Risk, or a real-time whiteboard that a coach marks with X's and O's to plan out a football play.

"The idea here is really to feel like the commander-in-chief in the headquarters. Feeling like a mastermind, moving masses of units and using deception skills on a big

VITALS ■ RELEASE 2010 PUBLISHER Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Eugen System LINK ruse.ubi.com



Eight players from six different factions of the world can play *R.U.S.E.*'s brand of war-poker multiplayer: Italy, France, USA, Germany, UK and USSR. Our sacrificial jeep will not live long enough to visit any of these handsome lands.



For casual tacticians, *R.U.S.E.*'s best draw may be its clear-cut, color-coordinated interface, which displays information dynamically based on your perspective.



Arrows and other visual footnotes show your plans-in-progress and give *R.U.S.E.* the feel of a dry-erase board with well-armed, animated X's and O's.

sector to reverse the balance of power is doable because of this un-zoomed view," says Girard. "It may look like a board game in the sense that everything is aggregated at this level. But contrary to a board game, everything is in real time."

Seeing units, objective tags and other data auto-resize is more than a militarized Google Maps: It also helps you make "big picture" decisions at a glance. If, say, the Elite Panzer division we're tasked with destroying is surrounded by tall stacks of infantry and AA units, we're not going to push our fleet of tanks head-in. Maybe we'll move a modest stack of infantry into the sector as a small "bet," hoping the bait will stir some of the German forces away from the Panzers we need to destroy. In other words, you're more interested in strategy than precise tactics; you'll fight on D-Day, not by directing a few troop transports toward a doomed beachhead, but by commanding the entire Normandy invasion, coastal and otherwise.

Relying on flexible interface, intuitive unit controls, independent unit AI and simplified information, Eugen hopes to build mental space for players to use deception in their favor—a flavor of strategy that can often get lost in the heavy micro of some modern RTSes. Only two of the game's 10-plus titular ruses have been revealed: deciphering, which reveals the movement plans of enemy units in a sector, and radio silence, which hides units within a sector as long as they remain there. We know another ruse will allow you to create fake units, and already these three represent concrete ways of messing with our enemies' heads that we can't wait to exploit. EVAN LAHTI

HANDS-ONLIVE



A POTENTIALLY GROUNDBREAKING REMOTE-GAMING SERVICE IS SET TO DEBUT THIS WINTER...BUT WILL IT EVEN WORK? PC GAMER TAKES YOU BEYOND THE HYPE.

The biggest announcement that emerged from March's Game Developers Conference was the first public demonstration of OnLive, a subscription-based PC-gaming-without-a-powerful-PC service. Utilizing technology called "cloud computing," the service touts the ability to play games like Crysis on a PC (or Mac) with the only real prerequisite being a hefty broadband connection—all the hard work of graphics processing will be done remotely through OnLive's servers and streamed to your computer. It's crazy, confusing and some say completely impossible. It could widen the audience for PC gaming, but only if OnLive's quality of service and compression tech is rock-solid (hey, no one wants to endure lag in a single-player game). Maximum PC Online Editor (and former PC Gamer Super Intern) Norman Chan tells us how—and if—it works.

THE IMMEDIATE BENEFIT OF OnLive is its low entry cost: You don't need a high-end gaming PC or even a console. Instead of running your games on your PC, you download a small plug-in which receives compressed video from a remote server that actually renders your games. Games purchased (or rented) with OnLive are activated on remote servers and the only data that's streamed to you is gameplay, video and audio. You never have to download software and patches, or handle physical media.

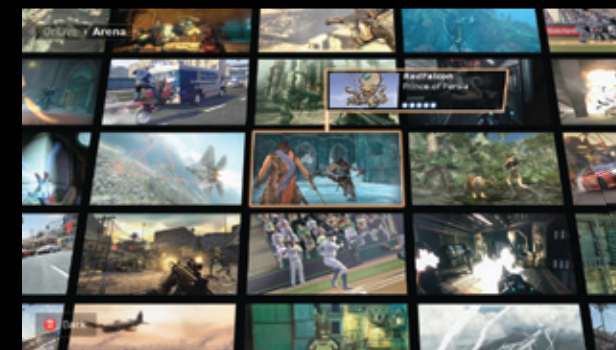
OnLive's main technical requirement? Broadband service. At the bare minimum, you must have a 1.5Mbit/sec internet connection to play OnLive games at an unsexy 720x480 resolution—and at least 5Mbit/sec of bandwidth for gaming at 1280x720. OnLive estimates that 71 percent of households in the US meet the minimum requirements for the service.

OnLive's Technology

How can OnLive stream a game that's rendered in real-time without any delay? Their secret sauce is a new video compression technology that they call "Interactive Video Compression." Cutting-edge data server farms utilize massive parallel processing to reduce gameplay video into a proprietary compression format that integrates the randomness of the existing internet broadband architecture into the codec. Steve Perlman, the founder of OnLive, used to work at Apple, and helped develop the first versions of Quicktime, so he has plenty of experience with video codec and compression. This isn't a technology that's easily duplicated, either. OnLive has filed over 100 patents to protect its tech, which uses both custom-brewed hardware (Nvidia has been a development partner) and software.

OUR BIG CONCERN about OnLive is the amount of latency (or lag) that you'll experience when playing games, since you're sending controller input signals to a remote server and receiving video images back. Inputs need to go through your desktop, travel to your ISP, then to OnLive's server where they're processed and a rendered image has to be compressed and sent back along the same path to your home—and that's just for single-player games. But OnLive assures us that they've optimized their system so that the maximum of latency you'll experience between input and display is 80 milliseconds.

OnLive points to recent studies that have shown that 80ms is the threshold for most people before their brain can process and notice any lag during playing. When we booted up *Burnout Paradise* at GDC with OnLive, the response time between a button press and a reaction on screen was almost always instantaneous and it felt like the game was running on middle-end hardware five feet away from our screen—not 50 miles away. We did experience a handful of minor ping spikes playing *BioShock*, *H.A.W.X.* and a few other titles, but these hiccups didn't feel any different than standard multiplayer lag—it's reassuring that we weren't struggling with control delays or syncing issues. But being that OnLive's hosting hub was just 50 miles from the convention floor and the service isn't scheduled to enter beta until this summer, it's hard to put too much stock into this initial hands-on.



If the idea of a video-driven friends list doesn't get you a little hot, we'd encourage you to do a quick check for a pulse. At the very least, you can look upon e-acquaintances and feel like Ozymandias from *Watchmen*.



Vaporware? Definitely not. OnLive is set to roll out its beta program this summer, followed by a winter release. Pictured here are some of OnLive's planned software partners.

MAYBE MORE PROMISING

than OnLive's game delivery service is the opportunity it presents for mass-spectating. When OnLive's UI boots up, you're greeted by a massive grid of game videos, showcasing thousands of games being played at that very moment by other gamers using OnLive. This feature, coupled with OnLive's community capabilities (friends lists, profiles, video sharing, matchmaking, etc.), could finally make the prospect of mass spectating feasible for online tournaments. A million people could be watching a *Counter-Strike* finals match with no server slowdown or additional modding required.

It's this potential for video sharing (and digital rental) that we're most interested in, and not the rhetoric generated in some quarters suggesting OnLive's cheap, hassle-free access to high-end hardware will make consoles or PC hardware obsolete. Rest assured that OnLive won't cause Nvidia (a partner in the service) or Intel to fold—for one, it's targeting a set of consumers that are willing to settle for (at maximum) a 720p gaming experience, and (for now) won't offer any exclusive game releases. There will be a respectable set of titles debuting with the service, provided by partners including Atari, THQ, Codemasters, Epic, EA, Ubisoft, Take-Two and Eidos.

We're naturally skeptical about OnLive: Until we see it running on thousands of systems simultaneously, we can't be sure it'll assure quality service lag-free, especially with some ISPs enforcing bandwidth caps and a generally mixed availability to high-speed in North America. But the technology's promise is astounding. Having it work at all is remarkable, and we'd welcome a plug-and-play, fast-loading PC game rental or subscription service as an easy path of entry for gamers that see hardware as an obstacle.



The OnLive gamepad sports integrated buttons for video recording and playback. [Yes, the face buttons spell out "LIVE."] The MicroConsole (below) lets you run the service through your television.

WOLFENSTEIN

GET PSYCHED?

In his DOS days, BJ Blaskowitz relied on the life-giving properties of Alpo dog food to regain health. This has since been proven to be quackery by modern medical science, but that

bizarre item helped shape *Wolfenstein 3D*'s over-the-top action: Mecha Hitlers, anguished screams of "Mein Lieben!" (and the massive chainguns that triggered them), and such legendary chapter titles as "Die, Führer, Die."

We're worried that little of this spirit seems reflected in *Wolfenstein*, a game that hands BJ a magical amulet that grants time-slowing, dimension-shifting powers more befitting of Merlin than a military man, and slots them with familiar stick-grenading, barrel-shooting mechanics of a WWII FPS. Minutes into our hands-on, we find BJ fighting a Third Reich that's more occulty than ever, and is obsessed with digging up fancy artifacts that increase their access to a gateway to an energy source known as the Veil, which they intend to harness to tip WWII in their favor. Result: Nazi sorcerers ("Scribes") that use energy shields and sprint like The Flash, electro skeletons and armored Heavy Troopers touting Ghostbuster rays that turn flesh into dust. Yes, that sounds nice.

BJ utilizes the wacky Veil feats, too. Tapping a key enters the Veil, tinting the screen neon-turquoise to reveal hidden enemies, passageways, Black Sun energy



PARTICLE CANNON

Our favorite *Wolf* weap we've seen is a sci-firehose that sprays green death energy and turns enemies into puffs of glowing dust. Raven tells us the particle cannon emerged from the dev's experiments with rope physics for a grappling hook that was later cut. "The rope firing from the grappling gun looked so cool we decided to drop it and turn the idea into an awesome weapon instead," says Eric Biessman, creative director.

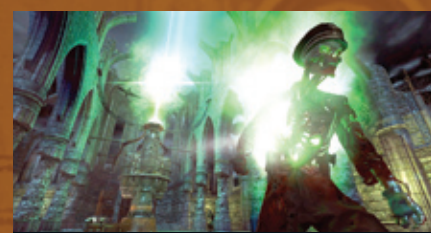
pools, and "Geists"—floating Veil creatures that look like giant fleas and explode when you shoot 'em. In an encounter with an armored Heavy Trooper, a quick peek behind the Veil highlighted vulnerable energy canisters in his armor, and later spotted weak points on a piece of arcane Nazi machinery.

It's a cool effect in moderation, but having to check into an alternate dimension to utilize these gameplay mechanics often felt like a cumbersome hoop we had to hop through. Peter Sokal, community manager at id, reassured us that "the Veil powers were designed from the begin-

ning to enhance the combat experience, and give the player choices in how best to kill Nazis. If a player doesn't want to use the Veil, then he won't have to outside of certain in-game puzzles."

Our fingers are crossed that over-the-top toys like the Particle Cannon (look up) can anchor the action, but we're still waiting to be convinced that *Wolfenstein* will be more than the sum of some very weird parts: some standard WWII shooting, magical Nazi skeletons, and a hero who isn't sure if he's a bad-ass soldier or Dr. Strange. EVAN LAHTI

VITALS ■ DEVELOPER RAVEN SOFTWARE PUBLISHER ACTIVISION
RELEASE DATE JUNE LINK WOLFENSTEIN.COM



Planned DLC: *Return to Castle Greyskullstein*.



Veil powers will be implemented in multiplayer.



Scribes: the Third Reich's speediest magicians.



"No, I'm sure you're a really great guy. I just think we should see other people"

THE SECRET WORLD

WHAT IF EVERY CONSPIRACY, MYTH AND
LEGEND WAS CONNECTED? THIS CREEPY NEW
MMO IS THE GAME TO PROVE IT.

It's the building kids are afraid to go into; the farm where the dogs disappeared." When Ragnar Tørnquist, project lead on *The Secret World*, talks about the sinister, swirling confusion that surrounds this conspiratorial MMO, he sends a shiver down the spine. "Evil is crawling out into the sunlight."

The Secret World is the first MMO to take place in "our world," with regular, recognizable towns and cities rather than a fantasy or science fiction setting. Your character is a sleeper agent, recently woken from his or her life to form a resistance against an evil that has existed for millennia, the force behind ancient myths, urban legends and modern conspiracies.

Starting in London, New York or Seoul, you'll have access to the entire game world from the very beginning. You won't, however, pick a specific class. Instead, you're a human, living a human existence, who's just beginning to discover that there's a lot more to your own life than you previously knew.

New abilities will become available as you play, letting you craft your own class by the choices you make. Tørnquist describes it as selecting your own deck of cards, appropriate to how you want to approach the missions. He claims that these will be unlike quests familiar

to many MMOs, suggesting no grind quests—no aimless tasks purely to increase your character's XP, since there are no levels to climb.

Missions will be integral parts of the game's story, and every line of dialogue will be voiced by a cast of over 100 actors. Tørnquist knows the complete story (having started writing it in 1997) of the linear plot missions, and has cliff-hanger plotlines in mind for when players get close to the end of the initial narrative. But this is only one aspect. "It's a jigsaw puzzle, and the player's role is to piece it together," he explains. Side quests are abundant, and each mission's thread proffers another element of the greater mysteries.

Combat, described by the developers as fast, third-person action gaming (there is no auto-attack) is being designed as an interesting distraction from slow-paced mystery-investigating. Weapons range from shotguns to voodoo dolls to magical powers—or any combination of them all.

Of course, this isn't the first game to promise big things like levelless character progression and unique combat at this stage in its development, but up to this point no one has really made it work. But there's no doubt that *The Secret World* will be distinct, a story-led MMO set in our own familiar world, where the unfamiliar starts to break through.

The MMO Times Picayune

■ "He's no good to me dead"

BioWare announced that the Bounty Hunter class will be Sith Empire-only in their upcoming MMO *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. BioWare says that restricting each class to only one faction allows them to craft a more specific and unique story arc for each class, so expect your Bounty Hunter to be faced with some very tough choices.



■ Off with his head!

Six months after *Warhammer Online*'s launch, Destruction on the Karak Eight Peaks (EU) server became the first realm to successfully sack a capital city and kill the enemy king. The slaughtering required 14 hours of concerted effort, but the dedicated raiders were rewarded with pieces of Sovereign armor, the highest-level gear in the game.

■ Warcraft: the soft drink

Moving one step closer to dominating every aspect of our lives, *World of Warcraft* will soon be available for bodily intake in the sugary, sweet form of new Horde and Alliance-themed Mountain Dew flavors. Be wary of grocery store ganking.



■ Tired of rescuing kittens?

Newly christened Paragon Studios (formerly NCsoft NorCal) announced that *Going Rogue*, *City of Heroes*' next expansion, will allow burned-out heroes or villains to change their allegiance through in-game actions. Among other things, this will unlock hero-only zones to former villains and vice versa.

■ Unless the squirrels get them too

If you were mauled by rabid squirrels on your way home today, would you feel guilty abandoning your guild mates without a proper farewell? For \$10, *SlightlyMorbid.com* will ease your transition into the afterlife by automatically informing your online friends of your unfortunate passing.

STAR TREK ONLINE

ALLERGY WARNING:
MAY CONTAIN TACHYONS

For a long time I've been afraid that *Star Trek Online* will either be fastidiously true to the fiction but no fun to play, or worse, a passable reskin of *World of Warcraft* that has little to do with the series.

But now that I've seen it being played in front of me, I'm happy.

"We're trying to figure out what makes a really good *Star Trek* game," executive producer Craig Zinkievich stresses, "and then figure out how we make that into an MMO."

That was exactly the impression I got watching the team pilot their Federation

starships through gorgeous stretches of space, carrying out missions for Starfleet and battling Orion cruisers. It didn't look like an MMO. And it looked like *fun*.

Every player is a captain, whether they play Federation or Klingon. It's 30 years after the last film, and peace between the two has broken down. You choose an officer type—tactical, science or engineering—then customize the hell out of your race, your face, your all-purpose starter ship, and your key bridge officers.

Bridge officers help with both space battles and away missions, when you

beam down to planets or aboard other starships. A good medical officer is going to be useful on rescue missions, and a good engineer on deck can grant you a new way to unleash more photon torpedoes in space combat.

It's this that I got to see firsthand, and my geek gland became engorged. Your basic weapons on most ships are simple: forward phaser banks, rear phaser banks and photon torpedoes. But you're also in charge of the power levels of all your ship's systems: full power to engines on approach, divert to shields when the phasers start flying, then to auxiliary to turn away faster and regenerate.

THIS IS HEAVEN. THESE are all sliders you can adjust smoothly at any point in combat, and you can also control the precise distribution of shield power between forward, rear, starboard and port.

It means combat is all about position and facing: broadside an enemy to get him in the sweet spot where both forward and rear phaser banks can target him. Once his forward shields are down, he'll try to turn away from you before you torpedo his exposed hull. You can divert power to engines to circle him and keep pounding his



"That's no moon."
"No, that one
actually is a moon."



Hey, sometimes a cigar
is just a cigar.



NX-91001?
Ohmigod, bingo!



Oh great, deadly
crystal world again.



Parking sucks in this
quadrant.



Property values on this rock have plummeted.

weak spot, but that leaves your own shields weaker.

It gets even more involved in group combat. Faced with a horde of Orion vessels that included a particularly tough Battleship, one of the developers charged in ahead, pumped all power to his shields, then attacked it. By luring it from the fray, he left his teammates free to rip through the lesser vessels quickly, then come and save him.

Your time in *Star Trek Online* is split between Exploration and Episodic missions. Exploration is all about going boldly where no one has gone before: millions and millions of stars with procedurally generated planets, asteroids, anomalies, missions and threats.

The appeal of exploration is mostly that *Star Trek Online* is gorgeous. The screenshots here show how sumptuous and diverse the planets look, and I saw how

**You don't
realize
just how
big this
stuff is**

stunning space is firsthand. It's strewn with weirdly glowing debris, majestic nebulae and hanging stations. You don't realize just how huge some of this stuff is until you fly in close, when it becomes clear you can steer your en-

tire ship through one pore of this gigantic chunk of rock.

The story episodes mostly take place around the hubs of five major empires, including Klingon, Romulan and Borg, and your missions will be hand-crafted and

varied. Craig points out that no episode of the series stayed in one place, and they've designed the game's missions similarly.

"You do not start in a vast terrain and kill rats for fifteen hours to open up the next area," says Craig, conjuring painful memories of The Barrens in *WoW*. "You're constantly going from environment to environment, from ship to ground, back to ship, from ship to interiors."

I pressed him for an example of a mission that wasn't just "kill ten rats."

"Saving a stranded freighter from Gorn attack, beaming onto that freighter, trying to replace the dilithium crystals in their warp core, having that fail, then trying to get all these guys out as the Gorn beam aboard the ship, then beaming back to your own ship for the big battle."

OK, that actually does sound kind of awesome.

TOM FRANCIS



My First
Starship™.

VITALS ■
DEVELOPER Cryptic Studios
PUBLISHER Atari
RELEASE July 2010
LINK www.startrekonline.com



Games *Not* Are Art

...and why we should be thankful that they're not

by Logan Decker

Developers give us vast, dazzling worlds to play in and memorable characters that stay with us long after we've stopped playing, and there's no question that games have the capacity to tell moving, emotional stories. So isn't it time that we accepted videogames as a burgeoning new medium for artistic expression whose works are at least as valid as whatever Michael Bay craps out over the summer?

No, it's not. Trying to shoehorn videogames into the definition of art diminishes the concept of art. But more seriously, it also unjustly downgrades the importance of play in our lives.

THUMBS-DOWN FROM EBERT

The controversy over games as a medium of artistic expression kicked into high gear after film critic Roger Ebert declared that he didn't think that videogames could be art (at least, not on the same level with music, literature and film). His argument is simple: Art requires an author whose intent is manifest in a creative work. To clarify: In order to be considered as art, the content must lie in the work, not the observer. So, a work of art is the artist declaring: *This is what I see. This is what I hear.*

That's why the pile of garbage in front of my house that I stepped in and cursed at this morning isn't art: Even though I responded emotionally to it, and even



though somebody dumped it there intentionally, nobody authored it; nobody imbued it with a particular set of choices that make a statement. But if an artist was allowed to dump the trash in front of my house in a museum, it *would* be art (we won't get into the issue of whether or not it would be *good* art). Because the artist made decisions, choosing *this* empty can and *that* torn piece of clothing, and those (presumably) carefully selected and edited pieces evoke a particular feeling or idea. And that content exists whether or not it is observed.

But games don't have authors in this sense. They have developers, of course—but the game itself, when not being played, is completely inert and meaningless. *There's no content without a player.* Developers give us the LEGO blocks. They can even contribute a story, backgrounds, and voice actors to help us enjoy the blocks more. But we put the blocks together and set them in motion. We define what is created and imbue it with our own emotions and responses; the resulting experience—the unique content—exists in *us*. Gamers create the game.

TWO WORLDS OF GOO

Now, let's talk about art. In 2006, a tanker truck pulled up in front of San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art and squirted 1,600 gallons of petroleum jelly up to the fourth floor for an installation by artist Matthew Barney. It was a huge hit; thousands of visitors paid money to view it.

So, Barney installed a piece that, in everyday life, is not only worthless but actually obnoxious. If someone had dumped 1,600 gallons of Vaseline on my doorstep, I'd have called the police. That helps to put things in perspective: Art is overrated. It doesn't have intrinsic value. *Art is not that big of a deal.* If I'm stranded on a desert island, my first

But games don't have authors in this sense. They have developers, of course—but the game itself, when not being played, is completely inert and meaningless. *There's no content without a player.*

orders of business are making a fishing rod, building a shelter, learning to make some sort of masculine-looking garment out of animal hides, and then amusing myself after dinner. Only after all those needs are taken care of will I begin worrying about cave painting. That's not true of all people, but it's true of *most* people.

On the other hand, play is a very big deal. *The need to play is hard-wired into every single human being.* It's part of how we explore the world. And in a sense games are tools, tools that we create to satisfy this part of ourselves that demands participation, stimulation, exploration, understanding and delight.

And what better example of this is there than *World of Goo*? You spend the first few levels gingerly pulling and prodding at the goo to get a sense of its weight, density, stickiness. And each level after that builds

on this physical knowledge of a virtual substance, and each level delivers a subtle reward, a confirmation of our understanding. All gamers across all genres understand the pleasure of comprehending rules, solving puzzles, and successfully executing plans. Ebert said that he thought videogames were more like sports, and this is exactly what he meant.

LOW ART, HIGH GAME

What makes *Half-Life 2* such a great game—despite all the pompous blathering about its artistic merits—is that it *does not try to do anything but be a great game*. It knows exactly where your gamer G-spot is and it keeps humping it for hours and hours. The story itself is incidental—games only have stories to give us a reason to play. Leaving Alyx's side as you descend down another elevator shaft, the insect-like crawl of the Walkers—these are all elements of superior craftsmanship designed to hold our attention; to keep us in the moment and *playing*. That's the thread that connects every single videogame ever created, from *Pong* to *Quake* to *Peggle* and *Left 4 Dead*.

Art has no obligation to do these things. That's why I love videogames. When I play, I'm not interested in decoding somebody else's abstracted thoughts; I don't think most of us are. I want to be in control, tested, challenged and thrilled. Play is so essential to our lives that we don't need to validate videogames by trying to stretch the canopy of art over them. We do not need to justify them. Games don't need to have artistic merit. They only need to be *fun*. That's why you don't see gamers forking over \$20 to fake an orgasm over Barney's congealed petroleum jelly—we're in it for a different kind of stimulation, one that's less up in the head and more fundamental to human nature.

PAINKILLER: Resurrection

SNEAK PEEK AT
THE SEQUEL TO
A PCG FAVORITE



THE GOOD

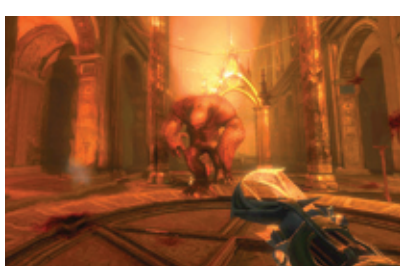
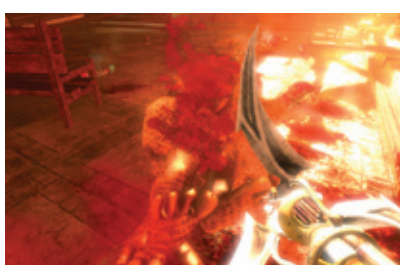
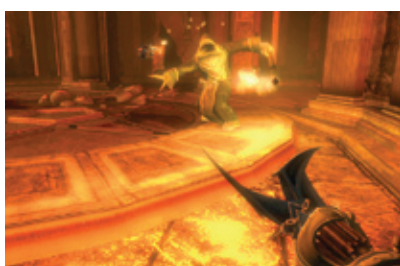
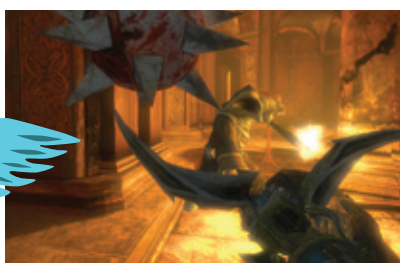
An ex-CIA agent accidentally blows himself up and wakes up in purgatory, where he becomes a pawn in the struggle between heaven and hell.

The signature whirling-blades-of-agony *Painkiller* weapon is back.

The stake and shuriken guns are back.

Painkiller: Resurrection will include a co-op campaign.

It'll be home in time to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus.



THE BAD

It's not being developed by People Can Fly, who made the original *Painkiller*.

Neither the expansion (*Painkiller: Battle Out of Hell*) nor the sequel (*Painkiller: Overdose*) was all that good.

The main character blew himself up.

Homegrown Games describes itself as "enthusiastic amateurs."

So far, all the screenshots—including the *PC Gamer* exclusives shown here—are somewhat underwhelming, unless you're really into red and black.



THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: MAFIA II

*Upcoming games distilled to their essences with the surgical precision of a sharpshooter on Diazepam.

1950s. Big city. Big ambitions. Bloody game.



Sorta like *GTA IV*, but you'll remember the story afterward.

CHRIS TAYLOR GIVES PC GAMER THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF HIS NEXT EPIC RTS

SUPREME COMMANDER 2

PC GAMER Is *Supreme Commander 2* going to be an evolutionary step forward, or is there going to be a "big idea" that transforms the game?

CHRIS TAYLOR I can promise you that there's something that's a *big* step. But you want people to be able to come in and feel like they're getting behind the controls of something they know how to drive, so we've also got evolution, revolution, innovation, and a bunch of other long words.

When we look at it, will it be instantly recognizable as *SupCom*?

Yes, and it will be instantly recognizable as a sequel. The amount of spectacular visual change—and I promise you *spectacular*—will be immediately evident. The production values that you probably couldn't believe you saw when you saw *Demigod*, those have now gotten into the bones of our company, where we can't go back to making anything less. We're at this new level of production values which includes an intense attention to detail in the unit design, and the use of



These early screenshots show a step up from *SupCom*'s unit models.

shaders to create subtle detail in the units that quite honestly couldn't be a priority for us the first time around because we were trying to build this massive game.

What really set *SupCom* apart from other RTS games was its strategic zoom technology. Will *SupCom 2* use the same system?

Yes—it's the foundation of the game. Strategic zoom will get better, it will feel better in your hands, and the way it flows will be even cleaner. One of

the key improvements is the idea that if you have jet fighters all moving in a clump, they really are a group. Now what we have is the ability to select fast-moving units without it being hard at all. Move the cursor anywhere in the vicinity, and you'll see a piece of feedback that says this is a group moving here, and you can actually click on it—not the units but the UI (user interface) target. You can see that they're fighters, you can see how many there are, you can see what their capabilities are. So we're giving you more command at the strategic level.

Are we still going to see hundreds of units running around the map at once?

Yes, absolutely! But part of the new direction that we're taking in the game is that we want the units to be



MEGAWHAT? The Cybran Megalith returns from *Forged Alliance* with double the legs and upgraded main cannon firepower.

BEEFCAKE The Fatboy has been working out! He's traded his aircraft landing pad for extra firepower and a set of four stilts.

more meaningful. One of my goals was—and this is a lofty goal—if I start the game and in the first 60 seconds I build a tank, I want that tank to be able to deliver the killing blow to my opponent 35 minutes to 90 minutes later. I don't want that first tank to be treated like cannon fodder. So how do I do that? By stepping back and making sure that each and every one of them has the ability to sustain themselves throughout the entire game, and they have to be able to continue to hold importance, and we need each of them to be much more complex and have many facets to them.

Will the story pick up where it left off, with four factions in play?

The story takes place 25 years later, after the events of *Forged Alliance*. We do have a very intriguing fictional universe, where you have the Alliance and the story of what happens after you defeat the Seraphim. What happens inside of this wonderful, peace-

ful corner of the galaxy to cause war to erupt once again? Who spoiled the party? My big clue is that, if you follow human history, do you know who spoils the fun?

The Germans?

Well, yes, technically, because they were humans. You get the sense that we're our own worst enemies. But that's all I'll say, I don't want to spoil too much. The game is about characters, improvements in our storytelling, in the way we use the camera to tell that story in-engine, the way we bring the human element into the experience. We're radically enhancing the game, going away from little iconographic units to a living, breathing RTS game that feels like it's alive with character. That's actually coming from the union of Square Enix and Gas Powered Games—Square has this unbelievable resume for creating stories and characters, and they're experts at this. And so they've suggested that we do more

with characters, and tell more interesting stories, and I said "Absolutely!"

One thing about *SupCom* that turned off a lot of gamers was the economy—managing power and adjacency bonuses became a bit too much like playing *SimCity*.

That's something we knew right from the very beginning was a problem, so we've made it much easier and much less confusing. That's our goal—to take economy management off the table. You'll be able to play this like any other RTS, as you'd expect. The nerd in me died a little bit, but said, "That's OK, Chris, because more people are going to have fun with the combat aspect of the game, and not get bogged down in the economic management."

A wise nerd indeed. There'll be more information on *Supreme Commander 2* coming soon in *PC Gamer*! DAN STAPLETON



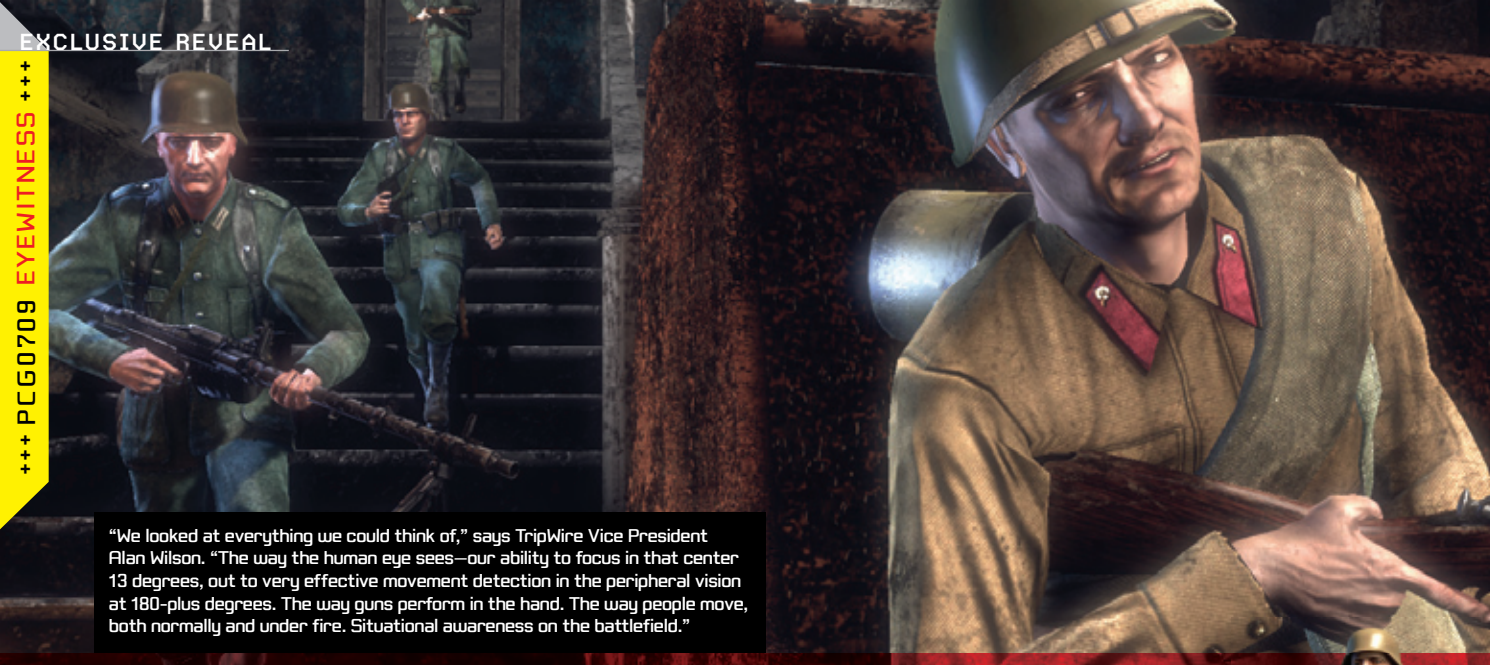
CHRIS TAYLOR
Founder & CEO of Gas Powered Games

"I'm a shock-and-awe kind of guy. I like to blow people's minds with cool new things that they've never seen before. You've got to expect a little bit of that, or it's not a game from me—it's from my stunt double."

SUPCOM 2 BULLET POINTS

- ✓ Enhanced engine
- ✓ Better performance, optimized for multi-core CPUs
- ✓ Will run great on a \$700-\$900 PC
- ✓ Huge armies
- ✓ More detailed unit models
- ✓ Fewer unit types, but each is more useful
- ✓ Improved Strategic Zoom
- ✓ Simplified economy
- ✓ Emphasis on story and characters
- ✓ The return of Dr. Brackman
- ✓ Advanced versions of favorite experimental units

VITALS ■ DEVELOPER
GAS POWERED GAMES
PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
RELEASE DATE 2010 **LINK**
SUPREMECOMMANDER.COM



"We looked at everything we could think of," says TripWire Vice President Alan Wilson. "The way the human eye sees—our ability to focus in that center 13 degrees, out to very effective movement detection in the peripheral vision at 180-plus degrees. The way guns perform in the hand. The way people move, both normally and under fire. Situational awareness on the battlefield."

RED ORCHESTRA

WORLD-EXCLUSIVE ANNOUNCEMENT
OF TRIPWIRE'S SECOND SYMPHONY

Heroes of Stalingrad

VITALS ■ DEVELOPER TripWire Interactive
PUBLISHER TBA RELEASE 2010
LINK tripwireinteractive.com



Mod Heroes
"The modding and map making community are really the unsung heroes of the *Red Orchestra: Ostfront* success story. After we released *Ostfront*, we decided to have a mapping competition—it was our way of giving back to the community, as we got our start in a modding contest. We took the 12 best maps and worked with the authors to polish them up for a free update to *RO* that was released on Steam. We'd be daft not to continue and expand what we've done with *RO* for *Heroes*. We'll definitely ship a modding/mapping SDK at launch."
—John Gibson, president

Shooters have gifted gaming with some wonderful nuance: splash damage, bullet penetration, grenade cooking, active reloads and rocket jump-ing. But it's a suite of techniques that, in most cases, boil down to having two simple targets: brain or body. If *Counter-Strike* or *Call of Duty* taught anatomy class, they'd say humans were balloon-headed beings with no other weak points; you either pop a fancy skullshot for an insta-kill, or connect enough of your clip anywhere else to run someone's HP dry.

Here's a brave thought: nicking someone's deltoid with a stray MG42 round shouldn't hurt as much as a snipe to the lung. En route to authentic war-play, it's an idea *Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad* intends to make real. The modder-to-developer team at TripWire knows there's a market for this stuff—

with more multiplatform shooters going gamepad-friendly (we're looking at you, *Far Cry 2* and *F.E.A.R. 2*), the dev is looking to add accessibility without doing disservice to any fans that count bolt-action rifle assembly as part of their breakfast routine.

"A very common theme we heard was, 'The first day I played *RO* I hated it; the second day I loved it,'" admits John Gibson, president and co-founder. "We lost a lot of players that never got past that first day because the learning curve was so steep. Players couldn't get our core gameplay anywhere else—realistic weapon usage and damage. So we looked at ways that we could get players over the learning curve without losing the core of what people loved about the first game."

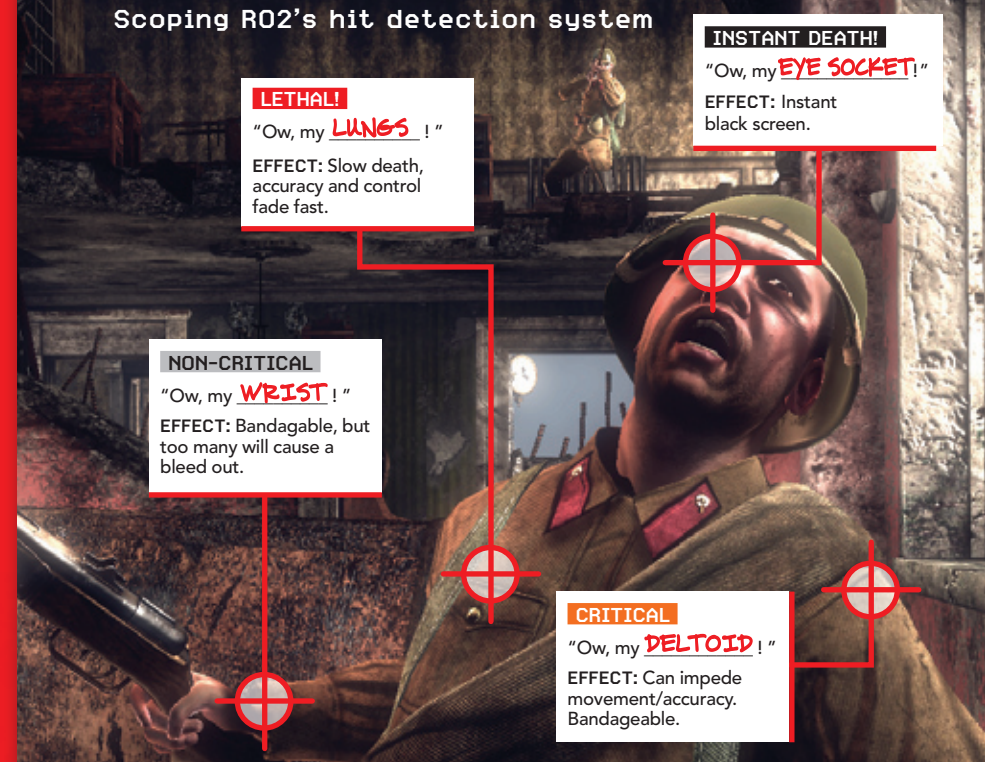
New modes are part of that approach. A single-player campaign will appear in *Red Orchestra* for the first time with *Heroes*, specifically Stalin-grad's historical stalemate, which you'll

experience from both sides. Also new is Skirmish, TripWire's take on *Rainbow Six's* Terrorist Hunt (the mode we think every shooter should have)—uniting up to 10 players for tense, respawnless co-op to clear out squads of AI.

TOSS IN INTEGRATED squad commands and a first-person cover system, and TripWire's ambition to expand its previously multiplayer-only title is on-target. As the first folks to play it, we're wooed by the way gunfights utilize suppression fire and first-person cover to build immersion. The complex ballistic physics come into play often, too: If an enemy's hundreds of meters away, you'll have to aim higher to account for bullet drop, or dial in your sights/scope to the approximate range the enemy is at. In multiplayer, you might see a standoff where one soldier is plucking away with his carbine at long range, hoping for a lucky hit while his target is dialing in his

BATTLE DAMAGE!

Scoping RO2's hit detection system



LETHAL!
"Ow, my **LUNGS** ! "
EFFECT: Slow death, accuracy and control fade fast.

NON-CRITICAL
"Ow, my **WRIST** ! "
EFFECT: Bandagable, but too many will cause a bleed out.

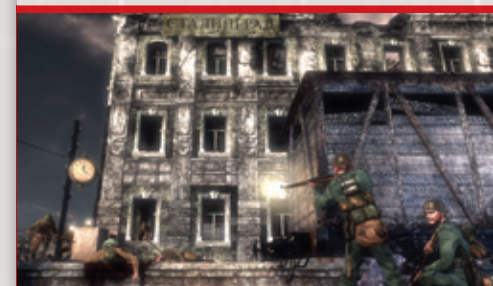
CRITICAL
"Ow, my **DELTOID** ! "
EFFECT: Can impede movement/accuracy. Bandageable.

INSTANT DEATH!
"Ow, my **EYE SOCKET** ! "
EFFECT: Instant black screen.

rifle scope to make an accurate shot.

In another tense standoff, we found ourselves 50 feet from the front door of a factory occupied by Germans. We tell our squad to take position behind a railroad car by middle-mouse click-dragging a 3D icon, then sprint a little further and stick to cover behind a pallet of railroad track by tapping Ctrl. German bullets are dinging against the metal we're pinned to like hail on a steel drum parade—but we can't see exactly where the shots are coming from. *RO* doesn't snap to a third-person perspective in cover mode, but being less aware of your surroundings via a mini-map or colored nametags hanging over every enemy actually improves the sense of engagement—it made our session more about making tactical decisions with limited information and less about hovering our crosshairs over pop-up targets.

WE CLICK-HOLD TO SPIT some blind-fire back, then order our squad to form up on us, letting them draw enough fire for us to lob a grenade at the Germans. The bomb clears the front porch, and the shot to our forearm is easily bandaged. (If we'd taken a hit to the stomach or another vital area, no amount of frantic tapping of the B key would've kept us from bleeding out.) It's a simple compromise between accessibility and realism—instead of decorating the screen with a constant mini-map and immersion-killing objective logos, let's implement a dedicated key that activates this info only when it's needed. Along with packing in new modes, these simple tweaks could go a long way toward retaining the realism that makes *RO* a waving standard along the likes of *Arma*. **EVAN LAHTI**



An iconic scene for students of the battle, Stalingrad Station No. 1 is dotted with railcars and equipment to use for cover.



Deployable MGs can bipod to almost any surface, and a mounting system let us hop through the train station's broken windows to flank Germans.

LOOKING BACK



DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS LEAD DESIGNER MIKE LAIDLAW REMINDS US TO REVISIT THE RETRO

VITALS

NAME: Mike Laidlaw
TITLE: Lead Designer,
Dragon Age: Origins
EXPERIENCE:
Mass Effect (2007),
Jade Empire (2005),
NWN: Hordes of the
Underdark (2003)

I remember vividly the first time I felt *old*. I blame a videogame. I spent three years—in the halcyon days before the first time the whole dotcom thing imploded—as an online reviewer for the Adrenaline Vault. (As an interesting aside, that's also where Emil Pagliarulo, lead designer of *Fallout 3*, got his start in the industry; apparently AVault had an eye for nascent RPG developers.) Six years at BioWare brings me to the present day and a chat with one of our combat designers, Eric.

I was talking about the first time it dawned on me that games could carry serious weight, even deliver a message. Watch as I date myself: I was home sick from school, my AM radio was blaring the afternoon's tenth repetition of Billy Joel's *We Didn't Start the Fire* (the local station boasted more variety in its advertising than its song rotation), and I was utterly enthralled by *Wasteland*.

FOR ALL INTENTS AND purposes, the game was a remake of the *Bard's Tale* series with guns and radiation suits, but my mind rendered this beautiful, desperate, scorched landscape, and somehow, combined with Billy Joel's exhortation that things were "always burning since the world's been turning," it all just clicked for me. The message? "Life after the bomb would really suck."

I was 12. Deep thoughts were something of a novelty at that point.

As my story wrapped up, Eric nodded politely, and with every ounce of enthusiasm his at-the-time-intern's soul could muster, he asked: "So...a Commodore 64. Was that, like, a calculator?"

Devastating.

Still, is there any reason he should have been familiar with a home computer several generations old? With Mario flinging himself about the galaxy at every twitch of your wrist, why would you blow dust off the contacts of that old *Super Mario Brothers* cartridge to awkwardly throw fireballs from what appears to be your nose? Let's be frank: the graphics and gameplay rarely hold up like we remember.

Yet there's a legacy there, a living legacy. It's still possible to meet the industry's pioneers, to press them for reactions to the latest trends.

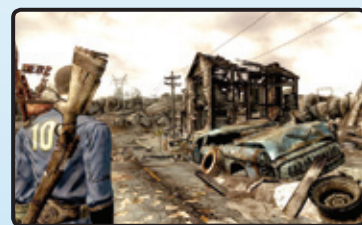
We're not so far into the tunnel that we can't see the light shining forward from those early classics and appreciate how we got from there to here. If there's one thing I encourage young developers—or even fans—to do, it's to dig into those old games and rediscover the genius moments of

gameplay that have inspired today's developers. It's a shame to see classics forgotten simply because their platforms are dated.

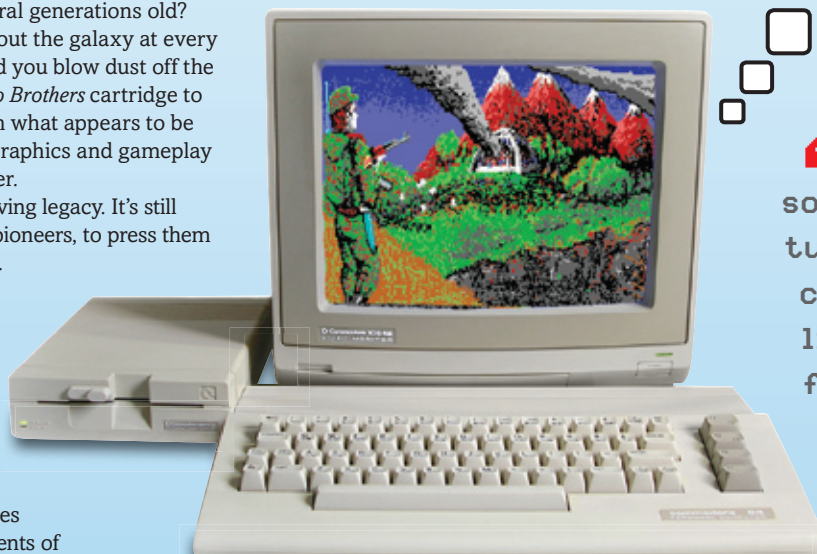
Playing *Fallout 3* really drove this point home. Could that blasted vision have been realized without the legacy of its prequels, or without *Wasteland* to inspire the first *Fallout*? Looking back helps developers and fans see what does and doesn't work, and what themes resonate most strongly. If there's anything I'm afraid of, it's that the constant changes in technology and even storage media might deprive us of access to those classics and all they have to teach us.

Obviously, legacies have been on my mind lately. As *Dragon Age: Origins* enters its final months of production and the developers add those critical tweaks that crystallize the feel of the game, I find myself asking, "What was that one awesome thing from *Baldur's Gate*? *Baldur's Gate II*? Heck, what did I love about the original *Bard's Tale*?" True, memory shoots with a soft-focus lens and complimentary lighting, but that's the best part: *Origins* isn't trying to remake an old title, it's trying to recapture a memorable experience.

So maybe being old isn't so bad. The industry needs people who remember the feelings of wonder those early classics stirred, just as badly as it needs fresh blood who, inspired by those ideas, can create modern masterpieces. ☒



“We're not so far into the tunnel that we can't see the light shining forward from those early classics.”



TRINE

A MULTIPLE-PERSONALITY PLATFORMER

Are you tired of manuals? We sure are. Sometimes it's nice to just pick up a game and know exactly what to do through sheer intuition. *Trine* is shaping up to be one of those titles. In a detailed 2.5D fantasy land, three characters converge upon a magical artifact

(you guessed it, the Trine). As they all make a grab for it, their souls bind together, meaning that only one of them can exist at a time. It's inconvenient for a trio of adventurers after the same treasure, but the Trine's soul-trapping powers form a tidy character-changing mechanic for the platform-puzzle side-scroller.

While it may look and sound like something out of *Discworld*, *Trine* plays like an old-school mix of *Pitfall* and forgettable-yet-innovative PlayStation game *Wild 9*. The whole world is a physics playground, manipulated with the trio's different abilities. The Wizard can cast spells using *Black and White*-style gestures (except they're good), summoning gigantic boxes to surf off the ground with or stack to fill gaps and climb up to platforms. The Knight can smash enemies into pits of spikes with his simple hack 'n' slashery, and the Thief can use her grappling hook to throw herself around levels with elastic ease.

One of the prettiest ledge-hoppers on the market

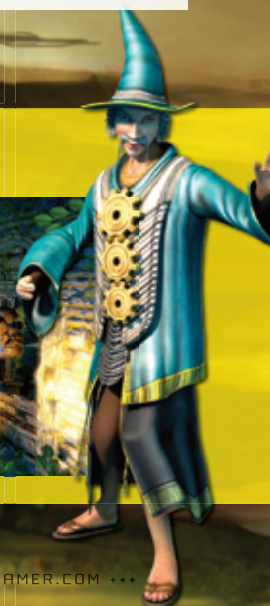
It sounds simple, but insta-swapping between these three heroes empowers you to tackle challenges in different ways. Not every puzzle or out-of-reach ledge relies on one rigid ability—most are flexible enough to allow for varied approaches. The Wizard can crush enemies under blocks; the Thief can swing across gaps at speed and kick them to death. At the very least, Finnish developer Frozenbyte is going to produce one of the prettiest ledge-hoppers on the market: free-form physics, background parallax, and flickering light sources make you want to keep moving

to the right side of the screen.

Our time with *Trine* didn't leave our minds bent, but we utterly enjoyed hopping through its dynamically lit vistas and getting a feel for the characters. The physics manipulation and flexible puzzles make for a strangely addictive and serene experience, and the well-voiced and funny (if not a little simple) plot should play out well. **ED ZITRON**

VITALS ■ PUBLISHER Ascaron
DEVELOPER Frozenbyte
RELEASE September
LINK www.trine-thegame.com

MAKING MAGIC! with Mr. Wizard



PCG REPLAYS THE GREAT GAMES OF OLD

X-COM: UFO DEFENSE

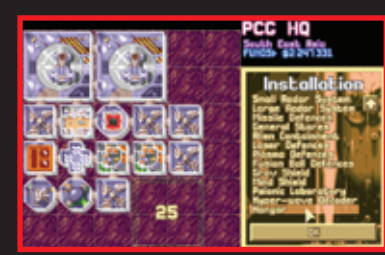
BATTLE ALIENS AND IMPENETRABLE CONTROLS



Kill aliens and research their advanced technology to develop new weapons and close the technological gap.



Position your bases around the globe for maximum radar coverage—just remember to build defenses against alien attacks.



Sectoid
The Sectoid Hier...
From soldiers to...
powerful psionic...
psionic powers a...
demoralize soldie...
even take contr...
minds. They bend...
human abductions...
mutilation. The...
used to extract...
material for cro...
developing clones...
human society...
provide both nu...
genetic material...
appears to want...
superior genetic...
increase the eff...
hive-like society

DAN This may come as a shock, but until now, I was the only editor at *PC Gamer* that had played *X-COM: UFO Defense*, the definitive turn-based tactical squad-combat game in which you defend the Earth from alien invasion and permanent resident of “Top 10 Games of All Time” lists. Maybe it’s not all that shocking, considering that *X-COM* was released in 1994, predating *PC Gamer* itself, and it was considered to be something of a sleeper hit at the time.

It’s a difficult game to introduce to new players, because by today’s standards the graphics are ancient, the interface is painful, and the learning curve is so steep it’s more like a learning wall unless you can find a PDF of the manual. However, it’s the game that cemented my love of the PC, so I’m taking this opportunity to

When half the team is bleeding out from wounds and you cap the last alien, it’s exhilarating.

correct the oversight of my peers and force them at Nerf-point to share in the joy of *X-COM*.

LOGAN Man, playing the global management part of this game is like playing with a pair of tweezers. It’s so painstaking, so intricate, there are so many menus and submenus and commands and options. I’m not saying that *X-COM* isn’t a great game, or that games shouldn’t be complex, but trying to beat back an alien invasion while micro-managing human and material resources without neglecting diplomatic service to my patron nations—well, look, just demote me to private, hand me a gun

and standard issue body armor and wish me luck.

JOSH A cautionary tale: I missed the 10-minute tutorial that Dan gave the other guys, so when I jumped in on my own I was immediately out of my depth. My first attempt at a ground assault on a crashed UFO was a spectacular failure, as a lone diminutive bug-eyed gray alien mowed down my helpless crew until I finally figured out how to fight back. Unfortunately, my victory was short-lived as my last crew member only had enough action points for the “throw” attack, which apparently caused him to throw his weapon (instead of a grenade like I had assumed) at the alien’s feet as an unwelcome peace offering. The alien did not accept his surrender.

DAN I tried to warn you.

EVAN *X-COM* is the sort of mind-occupying experience that’d make you sneak the game manual between your textbooks and read at school to plan out research builds, what you’d name your soldiers and what you’d equip them with...I could imagine a

teacher asking what amendment to the Constitution established women’s suffrage, and I blurt out: “Heavy plasma rifles!”

And that’s really where the value lies for me—the customization and the sense of ownership. Even if aspects of the presentation (unintuitive interface, nested data management, wasted cumulative weeks staring at that damned “Hidden movement” screen) don’t gel with today’s standards for playability, the tools are there to create a personalized experience.

DAN Survival tip: Naming a soldier after yourself thinking you’re going to take care of him and he’s going to become the badass of the squad is a death sentence. Somehow the aliens always know.

LOGAN I really dig the combat, although the creaky interface does take some getting used to. Like Josh, I started off accidentally tossing my gun at aliens. (I can just see them sitting at the table later: “Then this dumbass human throws his gun at Gerg! Swear to God. We blew his head off his shoulders.”) But it is fun fanning out the team and rooting the little bug-eyed monsters out of the grass; every step, every movement counts. When half the team is bleeding out from various wounds and you cap the last alien running for his life, it’s exhilarating.

JOSH After getting the hang of it, the turn-based combat offers strategic and tactical depth as you hunt down the aliens in farmyards, urban city blocks, and other classic settings. Add in research and production options, random alien invasions and base management, and I can begin to see why Dan still plays it to this day. Plus, it has a feature that few games today even attempt: destructible terrain. Like a 2D pixelated *Red Faction*, missed shots zoom past their targets and destroy objects like walls or fences in its path, producing new lines of sight for weapon fire or clearing enemy cover. The game feels way too advanced for 1994.

DAN To me, the destructible terrain makes all the difference in the world. So many “*X-COM* clones” have come along claiming to be the rightful heir to the throne, but you couldn’t blow a



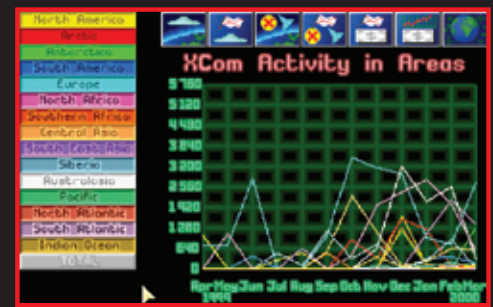
hole in a wall with a rocket launcher. Sorry, that’s just not going to cut it. I need to be able to change the conditions of the battlefield! And on that note, just wait until you guys research the Blaster Launcher. Now *that’s* terrain deformation for you.

LOGAN After the first hour and a half of playing, I had completely forgotten about the graphics and the 320x200 resolution; it just didn’t register anymore, because 98 percent of the game takes place in your head. I wish I enjoyed the more sophisticated tactical elements of *X-COM* more, because there’s so much depth. In fact, if I keep playing, I think I might just end up a strategy fan.

EVAN I can see why there’s still such a steady community that’s willing to play through the dated interface and controls. It’s pretty apparent how well an *X-COM* remake could go with even modest modernization: add co-op and some right-click contextual menus and you’re basically done.



Navigating *X-COM*’s menus without consulting a manual is almost as hazardous as battling the alien invaders, but once you master them it’s a non-issue.



We look forward to boots and flip-flops in the expansion pack.



THE FINAL CUT

WHAT GAMES LEAVE ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

GSC recently released an early build of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* from 2004, revealing many features that would later be cut from the final game. But it isn't the only developer to shed a little light on what got left behind—plenty of others are also revealing bits of their games that have been discarded due to lack of time, fear of controversy or ideas that simply didn't work out in play.

PROTO-GOO

In our interview last issue, Kyle Gabler explained that two of every three *World of Goo* levels were cut as they didn't meet the game's high standards. As further insight into the development process, 2D Boy has begun releasing old prototypes, back to its beginning as a simple, aimless casual game, charting its growth into the classic we now love. www.2dboy.com

GRIM DESIGNS

To celebrate *Grim Fandango*'s ten-year anniversary, lead designer Tim Schafer released the game's original design document. The 72-page PDF covers everything once planned for the game, with details of cut puzzles, scenes, plot



Too hot for TV! Gamers get a peek at C&C's deleted scenes.

details and unused characters like the Pizza Demon and the Giraffe Lady. "If only we had one or two more years!" says Schafer. www.snipurl.com/do1gm

BLACK SHEEP

Released to mark C&C: *Generals*' sixth anniversary, *Black Sheep* is a map

removed from the original game for being "too controversial." Playing as terrorist faction the GLA, you take control of a Toxin Tractor and use it to spray deadly poison onto the inhabitants of a town corrupted beyond salvation by the USA's propaganda. www.snipurl.com/do1ym

release meter

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING 0709

See that long list of games under the "Q2 2009" header below? Well, my calendar tells me there's only one month left in Q2 so it looks like all of those games are going to be released within 30 days of each other. That's going to be a fine 30 days, my friends. And it gets better—*Batman: Arkham Asylum* and Sierra's *Prototype* moved their release dates up to join the party!

—Josh the Intern

Q2 2009

Champions Online	Atari
Arma II	505 Games
Ghostbusters: The Video Game	Atari
Bionic Commando	Capcom
Street Fighter IV	Capcom
Jumpgate Evolution	Codemasters
Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising	Codemasters
Overlord II	Codemasters
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Sims 3	EA
Divinity 2	Ego Draconis
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Prototype	Sierra
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak
Red Faction: Guerilla	THQ
Anno 1404	Ubisoft
America's Army 3	U.S. Army

Q3 2009

Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Borderlands	2K
Machinarium	Amanita Design
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Dark Void	Capcom
Dirt 2	Codemasters
Battlefield 1943	EA
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Saboteur	EA
Section 8	SouthPeak
Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak
Hearts of Iron III	Paradox
CrimeCraft	Vogster

Q4 2009

BioShock 2	2K
Mafia II	2K
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	EA
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez
Metro 2033	THQ

Meet Jacob Norris. He's a welder. A blue-collar guy—a regular Joe. Sure, he might be one of the best damn welders out there, which is why he was recruited to help build an underwater city to house the decadent utopian ideals of a grandiose egomaniac. Looking back, it's easy to wonder if this was the right job, but when you're called to participate in one of the greatest projects ever conceived by man, you don't question it. Certainly not if you're a craftsman with the skills—and pride—that Jacob Norris has. That's why Mr. Norris first came to Rapture, and that's why he's still here, in 1959, during the outbreak of a civil war that's about to ruin everything the enigmatic An-drew Ryan set out to create. ¶ But he's not alone. He, along with seven other characters—a businessman, a housewife, and so on—are all participants in a product testing program initiated by Sinclair Solutions. They've all been given access to plasmids, tonics and weapons, then set loose in Rapture to brawl it out as they see fit. There's a war at hand, there are profits to be taken, and Sinclair is doing its best to foment dissent, provoke violence, stir up the populace—all in the name of good business. After all, the war won't be fought by important men. Instead, it will be fought by you, an everyday citizen of a once-thriving society on the cusp of utter annihilation. You will shoot, blast, snipe, smack, kill. You will, with your own hands, destroy the very thing you worked so hard to build.

WORLD
EXCLUSIVE

**The improbable
but undeniable
awesomeness of
BioShock 2
multiplayer**

By Gary Steinman



“You heard all the rumors about *BioShock 2* before it was announced: Is it a sequel? Is it a prequel? Well, I can tell you today that it’s *both*.”

I’m sitting in a nondescript conference room on the 17th floor of a nondescript office building in the nondescript town of London, Ontario, on a typically nondescript gray day. Sitting next to me is Mathieu Berube, lead designer at Digital Extremes. I’ve just been told the big secret about *BioShock 2*’s multiplayer mode, and I’m mere moments away from being the first person outside the dev team to ever see it in action. But first,

another few comments from Berube.

“We’ve been working with 2K Marin for well over a year now, and couldn’t tell anybody that we were working on *BioShock* multiplayer. It’s been maddening. Finally we get to reveal it.” Berube pauses for a moment. “With this game, the core promise we’re making to you, the gamer, is, we’re taking the toolset from the first game—all those things you loved, the combos with the plasmids and the weapons, using the environment—and we’re refining it and expanding on it and putting it into a competitive multiplayer setting.”

Berube (who, by the way, is decidedly *not* nondescript, with his extensive collection of piercings and gritty downtown fashion sensibility) is excited, as well he should be. Although a multiplayer mode had been confirmed alongside the first reveal of this hotly anticipated sequel, no one knew what to expect; all details were shrouded in the utmost secrecy. And that’s when the online chatter began: Will it be any good? Will it detract from the single-player experience? Will it...suck?!

Melissa Miller, senior producer at 2K Marin, is well aware of the concern. “I know

there’s a certain amount of skepticism,” she readily concedes. “*Why? How dare you?* But there’s a lot of care that’s going into this mode. It’s not just because everybody has multiplayer, so *BioShock* should have multiplayer. We actually believe there’s a new experience in here.” That’s why publisher 2K Games has an entirely separate team assigned to multiplayer; the mode isn’t intended to be a mere extension of the single-player game currently being developed at 2K Marin. Instead, *BioShock 2*’s multiplayer is being built to appeal to the core multiplayer gamer and the novice alike. That explains the choice of Digital Extremes, a developer with solid multiplayer cred (*Unreal Tournament 2003*) who formed a strong working relationship with 2K when it helped code last year’s PS3 version of the original *BioShock*. “It was a very natural thing to find a complete team whose *only* focus was multiplayer,” Miller continues, “to make sure it had just as much polish and love as the single-player.”

That also explains the surprising setting—a full year before the events of the first game, during the outbreak of the civil war that devastated Rapture. It’s a bold move, but it makes perfect sense: it’s a timeframe that we all wish we knew more about; it’s a time of war—perfect for

multiplayer action; and it allows the team the time and space to push more story than typically found in a multiplayer mode, offering a setting that’s at once familiar to anyone who’s played the first but completely original when compared with the sequel’s single-player campaign.

Indeed, the story is essential here. The fact that multiplayer is a prequel with narrative elements delivered at key moments, revealing even more about *BioShock*’s twisted world than you’ll get from single-player alone, is one of the key reasons to drop into this mode. But even after you make your way through all 10 multiplayer maps and digest all the story elements, Berube is confident the gameplay will keep you coming back for more. “There’s nothing out there that’s comparable, in terms of combinatorial play and the whole look and feel of the action,” he gushes. “Looking at the competition, they’re all military shooters—they’re all fun—but they’re not unique like *BioShock* is. There’s not going to be any multiplayer shooter like this for a very long time.”

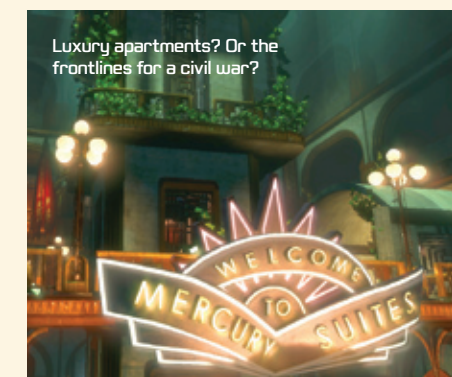
Looks that kill

The more you splice, the uglier you get. For each character, there’s a clean version that represents your in-game avatar, and a mutated version that you’ll see when you encounter your doppelganger in a match. The team hinted at more character customization, but refused to budge on any additional details.

Before



After



Luxury apartments? Or the frontlines for a civil war?



No, this isn't the prototype Big Daddy from the single-player game. This is the original Rosie, complete with drill, rivet gun and proximity mines.

Congratulations, *citizen of Rapture! You've been approved to join the Sinclair Solutions team as a product tester! We'd like to invite you to test our home-defense product in the field and tell us how you feel! With your continued effort, you'll soon earn access to exclusive Bronze Club benefits! So get out there and start earning those rewards!*

My demo starts in an apartment. *My* apartment. The warm, sweeping art deco lines remind me of the rare quiet moment in the first game, when I cleared out an area in Mercury Suites and stole a few seconds to just look around. Dark hardwood floors. A crackling fire. An ocean view, casting a bluish tint to the curved window. Persian rug, armoire, hand-carved details in the woodwork.

I'm snapped out of my reverie by the clatter of a tape machine replaying the overeager voice of an old-timey pitchman. It's Sinclair Solutions, confirming my enrollment in their program, giving me my starter kit to test: pistol, shotgun, and the three basic elemental plasmids (fire, ice, electricity).

So what else happens in this apartment? Think of it as a 3D space that replaces the typical multiplayer 2D menus. It's here that you can check the leaderboards, customize your character, and change your loadouts (more on that later). It's also here that you receive the optional narrative—stress on *optional*, as the dev team is eager to point out that you can skip the narrative and jump directly into matches. But even if you don't care all that much about your role in the civil war, you can't help but become immersed in Rapture's unique world. Even entering matches has that unique *BioShock* feel: You begin a session by stepping into your own private bathysphere, then pulling the lever.

If you *are* interested in the story, you'll find it in three ways. In every match, you accumulate Adam based on your performance—kills, assists, hacks, becoming the Big Daddy, killing the Big Daddy, match standing, and plenty of other stats that have yet to be revealed. Nab enough Adam, and you'll rank up. At that point, you receive another kit with new tonics, plasmids, weapons and weapon upgrades. You'll also get a new message from Sinclair revealing more story, culminating in a final rank and a final message. (The team is keeping mum on whether or not you'll also be treated to a closing cinematic.)

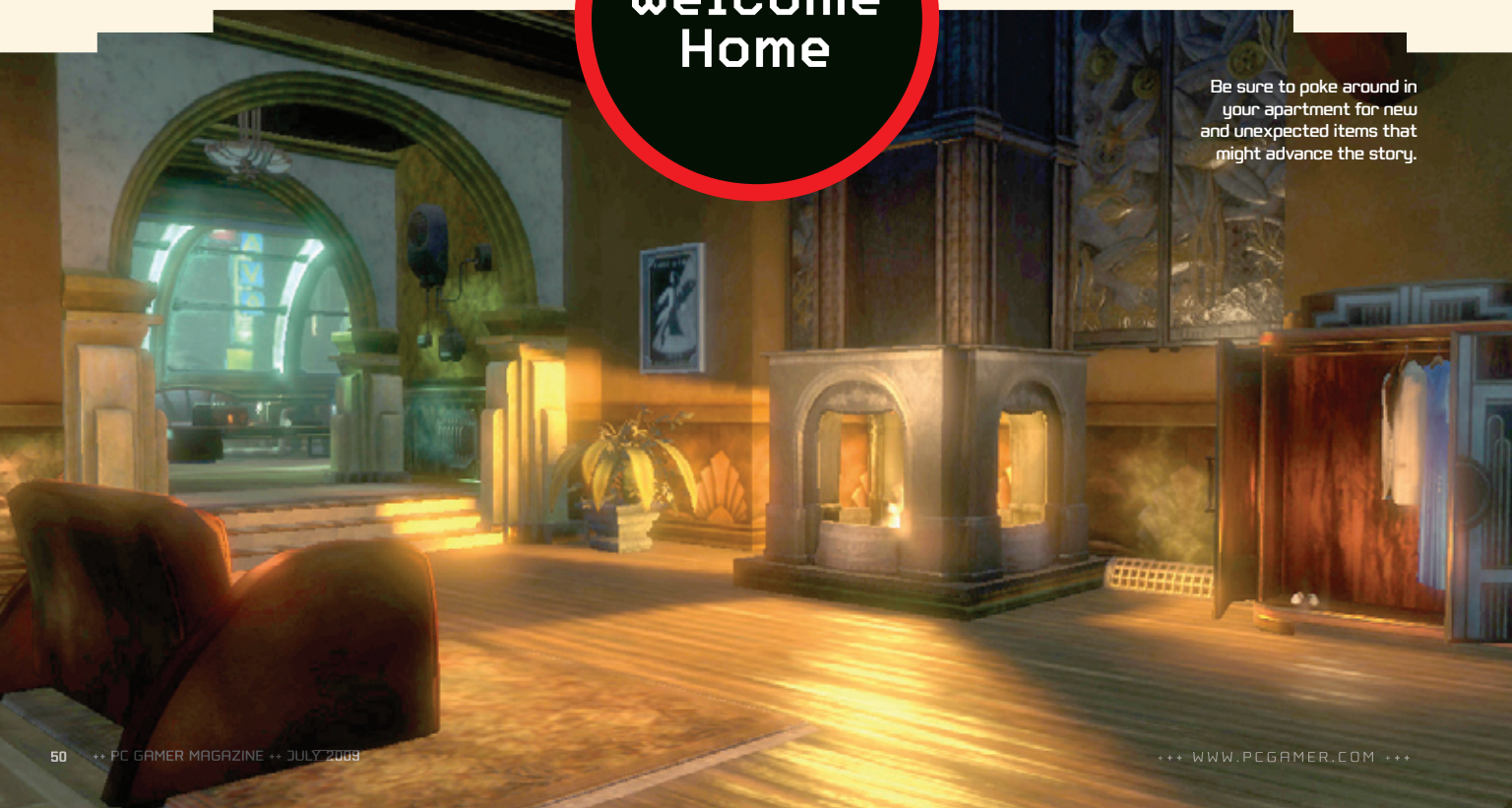
Next, there's your character: Depending on who you play with (or against) you'll hear all kinds of different "barks" (their term for vocal outbursts) that lend color to the game and reveal more about the citizenry of Rapture. "Rapture is this thriving society, then everybody got addicted to splicing and it all went to sh-t," Miller says. "For instance, Mr. Norris: He has a whole story about how he came to Rapture, and a lot of it had to do with his welding ability and helping to actually build this city. But now as he's become spliced up, he has all these delusions."

Finally, there's Rapture itself. If you played the first game, you already know that the ruined metropolis was perhaps the grandest character of them all. Speaking of which, it's about time we enter Rapture, so with a tug of that familiar lever in the bathysphere, our demo finally begins...



Welcome Home

Be sure to poke around in your apartment for new and unexpected items that might advance the story.



Find the Big Daddy suit and you become the ultimate death dealer. Kill a Big Daddy and you get a hefty helping of Adam to boost your score.

No Reservations

Basic quick match. Matchmaking puts you with players of similar skill level. We're going to be fighting in Kashmir today, which is from the first game. This is where the civil war started. This is where the first bomb went off and people died, and it's been re-envisioned for multiplayer. Game mode is Free For All. No teams, everyone is out for themselves."

Berube is talking in clipped sentences, hammering me with everything I need to know before the actual match begins. In our conference room is a programmer who's driving the playtest, joined by six other staffers elsewhere throughout the building. All modes support up to 10 people, but today we're playing with seven.

I hear a siren. Then I'm in Kashmir...but it doesn't look exactly like I remember. I spy the Happy New Year sign, I see all the festive trappings of a blowout celebration, but the layout is completely different.

Next, I see a fist held up in the air, crackling with electricity. *Brrrrzzzt!* A fat businessman has stopped cold in his tracks, and our welder immediately blasts him in the face with a shotgun. "Doing those one-two punches from the first game is a lot faster since we're bypassing the equip phase," Berube says about the new ability to simultaneously wield weapons and plasmids. We run up a set of stairs, then lurk behind some cover. As we lie in wait, I see our fiery fist getting hotter by the second. "Elemental plasmids can now be charged for an extra kick, so when you release and land it..." Berube is interrupted by an on-screen yelp as our player sets a housewife aflame. "Yeah, *exactly*," he finishes. With Incinerate, you can tag people for damage over time, and our po-

tent blaze is just enough to make short work of another citizen. We make a mad dash to a clown-faced vending machine for more Eve (fuel for our plasmids), then do a quick turn to clobber another housewife with our wrench. "Melee is now quick-melee," Berube says. "You don't need to equip it, so you can smash someone really fast with it."

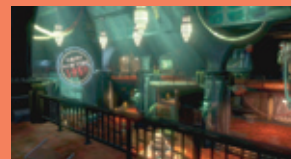
Next, we're off to the turrets. In Kashmir, there's a rocket turret and a machinegun turret. Each can be hacked (no minigame, just a timer bar), and you get full credit for any kills or assists (damage dealt in the final five seconds before a kill) from a friendly turret. Obviously, these are popular locations. As we're trying to hack a turret, a businessman leaps out from behind a column and dishes out a mortal whack to the back of our head with a golf club (each of the eight characters has their own melee weapon—the housewife has a frying pan, the welder has a wrench—but they all do equal damage).

While waiting to respawn, we hear a rumbling, protracted groan. "That's the Big Daddy roar," Berube smiles. "We have Big Daddies in multiplayer. Difference is, we are treating them as a power-up, so you find a suit in the level, and you get to put it on and be a Big Daddy until somebody takes you down. You get access to his rivet gun, and you're very strong." We pick a different loadout (you can swap among three loadouts during respawns), this time with Winter Blast so we can slow down Daddy while we nail him with our shotgun. Also in this loadout: a new plasmid exclusive to multiplayer—Aero Dash, which we use to jet across a balcony in order to rush toward the showdown. He might be dangerous, but you get big points for killing Big Daddy, so better to fly toward the fray than to run away like a coward.

Local Color

Along with Kashmir, two other familiar locations were also revealed: Mercury Suites and Point Prometheus. All 10 locations will be from the first game, but all will be rebuilt to work in multiplayer. A few tasty details on the three we know about:

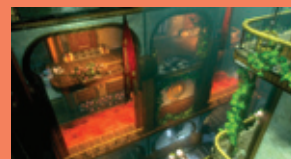
Kashmir



A big, centralized location, with balconies for quick navigation and two turrets that

will be a constant source of contention. Kashmir is packed with narrative tidbits. For example, find the toilet stall with the missing door, and inside is a mechanic's toolbox. "Inside of that there's explosives that you can use to your advantage," says Mat Tremblay, art director at Digital Extremes. "Looking at it, it's a staged element. But you can also see that quite obviously somebody has planned to do something. And that hints at the lead-up to the explosion within Kashmir."

Mercury Suites



Wondering what these luxe apartments looked like before the fall of Rapture?

You'll see a cleaner, brighter complex, with flourishing trees and climbing ivy. The area is almost three levels high, so the battles will have a lot more verticality in them.

Point Prometheus

Set in the museum section, this is a symmetrical map that lends itself to team play. Originally, the museum was going to have a more natural-history feel, similar to the first game, but the team back at 2K Marin suggested something more in line with the money-hungry denizens of Rapture. That's why the museum now has a gaudy, commercialized setup that'd make P.T. Barnum proud.

Hello from Sinclair Solutions! *Of course we knew you'd make it home safely with a Sinclair product at your side! But wait—we are proud to announce that you have been awarded membership in the Bronze Club! Congratulations! But don't stop now. Keep it up and you'll be basking in the benefits of our Silver Society in no time at all!*

Plasmids Aplenty

With no confirmation on the final number of plasmids, and plenty more to be revealed later, we got some inside intel on the five that we know of—three returning elemental plasmids, and two new ones exclusive to the multiplayer.

Electro Bolt

Each of the returning plasmids has been tweaked to make more sense in multiplayer, but this one is probably closest to what you remember from the original game. The major difference? The stun effect is much shorter. Use it to zap foes while they're standing in water, or to zap them directly, then line up a headshot or swoop in for a melee attack.

Incinerate

Perfect for the player whose aim isn't true. Charge it up, then land it pretty easily (it doesn't require as precise targeting as the other elemental plasmids). Incinerate does a lot of damage over time, but your foes get a speed boost while on fire, enabling them to dash toward water. Also great for tagging enemies for easy assists.

Winter Blast

This one doesn't encase you in a bubble of ice like in the single-player game, but it does slow you down and make you considerably more fragile. You can still put up a fight, but if you're not careful, you can be reduced to chunks. Great against Big Daddies. Also good to cool down an Incinerated ally.

Aero Dash

Great for navigating the maps, Aero Dash lets you vault over long distances. Also an offensive plasmid: tackle someone into a wall, then whack away with a golf club while they're stunned, or simply shove them over a ledge. We're also told that Aero Dash is "more effective" in the unannounced game mode—a tantalizing clue...

Geyser Trap

A prototype of the original Cyclone, Geyser literally shoots up a stream of water, so it's everything from a portable jump pad to an offensive weapon (propel someone into the ceiling) to a combo setup (use it on a foe, then have an ally zap the Geyser with Electro Bolt—or use it on an ally to help him snipe at a foe from above).



You're part of the civil war in Rapture, contributing to its destruction.

A Man Chooses

Here's what *BioShock 2* multiplayer is not. It's *not* an assortment of hokey modes, like Big Daddy vs. Li'l Sis. It's *not* a collection of cringe-worthy escort missions. It's *not* a dopey battle of plasmids vs. physical weapons.

Instead, it's three basic modes: Free For All, Team Deathmatch and an as-yet-unannounced third mode with co-op elements in it. And in each mode, you have a limited amount of weaponry at your disposal. Every character has three loadouts to swap among during respawns, and every loadout has exactly two weapons, two plasmids and three gene tonics. Simple, effective and—judging from my eyes-only presentation—fun.

"We wanted to focus more on the uniqueness of the action than the uniqueness of the mode," Berube explains. "People generally flock back to team deathmatch, even though devs try to include a lot of different modes."

But here's where it gets interesting:

Rather than starting out with specific archetypes—say, a sniper or a soldier or a scout—you can build your own archetypes, creating a series of loadouts that allow you to fully customize your character to suit your skills and style, then swap among these loadouts every time you respawn. The flexibility is astounding. When you start calculating all the permutations (keep in mind that each weapon also has three possible upgrades), you easily reach into the thousands, perhaps higher. On top of that, you can rank up through the system based on your skills and play style, so even a casual player will eventually make it all the way to the finish line. Not a great shot? Use area-of-effect plasmids and focus on hacking and assists, and you'll do just fine. More of a 133t kinda guy? Zap 'em with Electro Bolt, then line up your headshots and score 20 kills to finish first.

This customization is also expected to carry over to the team play, with players building loadouts to complement



All the characters suffer from their own bizarre delusions—like housewife Barbara Johnson, who thinks the Big Daddy is just the family dog acting up.

each other. If you're in an area with lots of those highly flammable oil slicks, squaring off against foes armed with Incinerate, make sure someone in your group has Winter Blast to put out the fires, both in the environment and on your teammates. (You can't hurt your teammates, but you can defrost them or cool them off with your plasmids.) Strategies abound: Perhaps you want to equip an Eve Saver tonic along with a hacking tonic, then rush around hacking the vending machines to harm your foes when they try to replenish their Eve. These loadouts start out simply enough, but by the time you unlock everything in the multiplayer mode, you'll have a massive toolset at your disposal, including customizable



The shotgun can be upgraded for a wider range, longer distance or bigger ammo clip.

"That's what's going to keep you coming back: how you personalize your play style over time. How you use all of those powers that you can't find in other games."

weapons that you can adjust for range, accuracy, damage, spread, ammo and more. It's all about choice, which was so important in the original game. Sure, there are rules and limitations—but the opportunity to customize the experience is remarkable. "The fact is, I'm a terrible shot—just horrific," Miller concedes. "I'm typically not a multiplayer gamer because I'm so poor with accuracy. But when you add in the plasmids, I actually can hold my own in a multiplayer match. That's really cool for me. I think there's a lot of opportunity for players who are fans of the single-player game to come

in and find a pretty accessible experience. But then with all the possible combinations, the more hardcore people can do some crazy stuff in our matches." "Ask other players around the office, and the way they play is totally different based on their loadouts," Berube says. "That's what's going to keep you coming back: how you personalize your play style over time. How you use all of those powers that you can't find in other games in combination with all of your weapon tactics. You're going to be coming back just to get that taste, because you won't get it anywhere else." ❌

STARCRAFT II WHAT A RUSH

Bring on the Zerg!
We go behind the
scenes with
StarCraft II: the
biggest strategy
game of the year.

BY TIM EDWARDS

This is terror incarnate. I am in deep, deep trouble, and national pride is on the line. It's a 2v2 match on a lush forest map. The enemy, a pair of journalists from Germany, are the Zerg. We are the Terrans. The Zerg have spread their sinister influence over two-thirds of the map, dropping their hatcheries and hives near the majority of resource points. Our Terran bases are hemmed in, facing a constant barrage of advancing Zerg ground troops: little Zerglings that form a mass of flailing gray-brown limbs. They have hordes of Roaches—weird balls on legs that spit acid and slash at their enemies with vicious claws. And they have Banelings—suicidal bugs that charge at their enemies, blowing themselves up in a gloopy green explosion.

The pressure is immense. At the entrance to my base, I've built a wall of support structures, behind which my hard-hitting Siege Tanks plant their heavy feet into the ground and drop splash damage artillery into the melee. I click on one. The interface shows an animated portrait of the driver. He's a jumped-up trucker in a boiler suit and cap, incongruously laid-back. He turns to the camera and flashes a broad, brilliant grin. It looks like he's having a whale of a time.

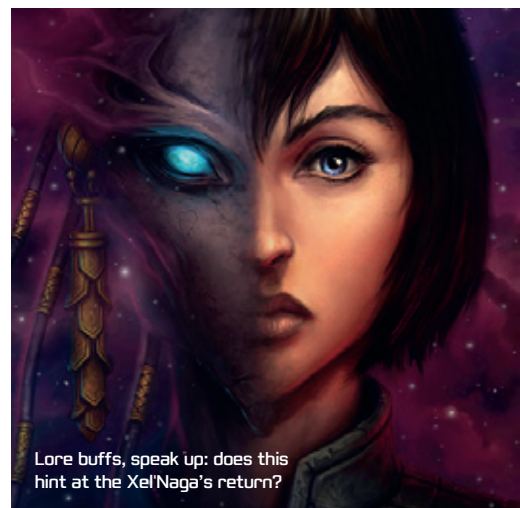
So am I.

StarCraft II is nearly finished. And it's going to be brilliant.





The Terrans, sandwiched by Protoss and Zerg, are so very boned.



Lore buffs, speak up: does this hint at the Xel'Naga's return?



Marines won't last long against an Ultralisk.



Don't allow Protoss forces to dig in—they're too powerful to dig back out.

This is the first game that Blizzard, the developer of *World of Warcraft*, has produced since that MMO took over the world. The original 1998 *StarCraft* was a genuine PC classic, probably the best-loved real-time strategy game of all time. It told a weird tale of space-truckers and cowboys, rebellions and aliens, and a fight between three races.

There were the Giger-esque alien consortium called the Zerg, led by a hive mind, and (OMG SPOILERZ) later by a corrupted psychic special forces marine named Sarah Kerrigan. There were the Protoss: a species of elegant and aggressive space-elves split by factional differences, now united to face the Zerg threat. Finally, there's the Terran Confederacy: intergalactic future-humans on the fringes of space, run down by decades of rebellion and civil warfare. Stuff blew up really, really good.

Before *StarCraft*, RTS was about two very similar forces fighting. *StarCraft*'s three races were radically different in their unit makeup, abilities and playing style. *StarCraft* birthed asymmetry: the idea that three very different playing styles and armies could be equally matched.

"We don't even know if we can balance the game right now"

But *StarCraft* wasn't just about how individual armies fit together: it was about the pace at which they fought.

Its super-accelerated strategy and massive scale (pro players tend to click the mouse 350 times per minute as they spread their armies and resource collections across acres of map-space) created the template for real-time strategy gaming. It was, for many, the perfect game. Untouchable.

BIG IN KOREA

In the process, it spawned one of the most spectacular and vibrant web communities and worldwide followings, including the legendary South Korean e-sports scene. Here, *StarCraft* matches are still filmed and televised nationwide, at the sport's peak attracting 125,000 people to watch the live finals of the national StarLeague. That's

125,000 people, on a Korean beach, watching two teenagers play a videogame.

So there's a certain amount of pressure on the *StarCraft II* team to deliver—not just a strategy game, but a fully fledged multi-player and multimedia phenomenon.

That's a problem for Dustin Browder, one of *StarCraft II*'s senior designers, staring down the barrel of the game's forthcoming beta release. The game, he says, is in a good state.

"All the units are in, and the single-player campaign is taking shape." But there are problems. The back-end, the infrastructure to support matchmaking, is causing headaches. They're still working on the basic look and feel of the individual units, and whether all the units they've currently created should even stay in the game. Blizzard won't hand a final unit list over even as I'm playing the pre-beta version. The problem? Everything is subject to change, from the damage inflicted by a single Protoss Stalker to the speed at which that same walker can move and rotate its cannon.

As Browder puts it, "We don't even know if we can balance the game right now. We'll only find out if it's possible once we

ARMY OF MANY The minions of *StarCraft II*



A NIGHTHAWK

This Terran flyer can drop auto-turrets—a quick way of detecting stealthed units in your base.

B CORRUPTOR

Rather than destroying an enemy, Corruptors turn them into friendly turrets. Friendly to you, anyway.

C BANELING

The green goo on the back of a Baneling can explode, causing massive splash damage. Evolve Banelings from Zerglings.

D LARVA

Almost all Zerg units are evolved from larvae, spawned three at a time from a hatchery.

E OVERLORD

This hovering brain provides command support for the Zerg. It can also vomit the purple “creep” that Zerg thrive on.

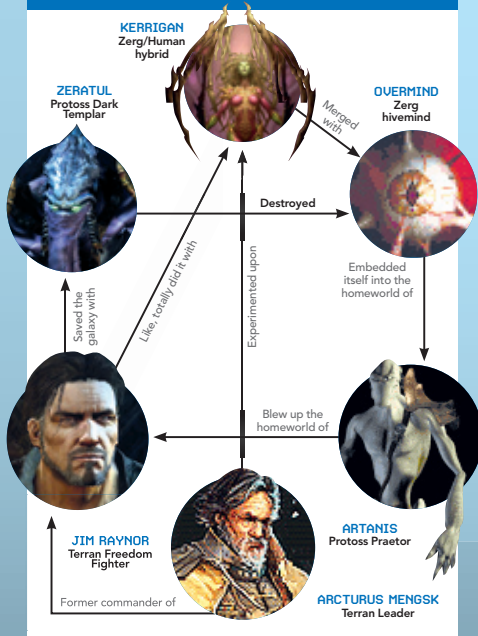
F HYDRALISK

Hydralisks spit acid at both ground and air troops. They’re devastating in numbers, but fragile alone.

G DRONE

Drones are the Zerg’s resource gatherer. As a bonus, they can also mutate into fleshy buildings.

WHO’S WHO Meet the cast of *StarCraft II*



get into beta, and we see the really hardcore gamers hammering on it for weeks.” Right now they can play the game themselves, and they can run simulations of units fighting each other, tweaking every variable until stuff works, but that’s nothing. What they need is the data only gamers provide: detailed recordings of matches, win-loss ratios for each of the sides, angry forum posts declaring balance problems the end of the world. And they need a *lot* of it.

But that’s fine. Because as I test this early version of the game, I start to get a feel for how *StarCraft II* will play in the real world.

And if you want the one-line description, try this. It’s like *StarCraft*, but with a “II” on the end.

“The Infestor, ability three: it releases infected marines from egg-sacs on its back.”

Those expecting a radical reinvention of the real-time strategy genre should look away now. Those expecting a radical reinvention of *StarCraft* should look away, too.

The basics are identical. The three races must all gather blue minerals and vespene gas, and convert them

into a trickle, then a steady stream, and eventually a flood of units. Success in the multiplayer game is about expansion—leaving your starting zone and claiming new mineral nodes, then efficiently placing new units on the field. Outside of your base, the other skill to be tested is your micromanagement: isolating enemy targets by boxing them in or blocking their path with your own units, or dancing your own troops around an enemy’s lumber-



The splat is the Battlecruiser's awesome Yamato cannon.

ing turning circle. In *StarCraft II*, there are units that seem designed specifically to cause chaos like this: Zerglings, for example, swarm around the larger units, trapping them in place.

INVISIBLE WAR

There appears to be no end to the ways in which you can be pwned. In the day I spent playing, I found dozens. Try a Terran marine rush: build two barracks and attach a reactor to each. A reactor is a modular add-on that doubles the production capacity, but limits the type of troops you can make. With two barracks and an attached reactor you can churn out four marines every 20 seconds—the perfect rush force. Upgrade them with armor, health and stim-packs, and they'll simply refuse to die.

Or try some stealth dickery. Protoss units are expensive and take a long, long time to warp into the battlefield, and you're going to need lots of them to break through an organized defense. So don't. Build Dark Templars—vicious melee warriors armed with a Darth Maul-style lightsaber staff. They have a neat trick: they're invisible. The only way to spot them is to have detector units or buildings in your army. Sneak a few Dark Templars into the rear of an unprepared base and ravage supply lines and support structures. Game over.

Or try some Zerg molestation. Take, first, the Corruptor. This flying squid has a unique way of causing a headache—if it kills an enemy, that unit becomes a stationary anti-air turret. Pair the Corruptor with an Infestor: it burrows underneath an enemy base, ready to cause chaos. Ability one: infect and then explode any enemy unit. The splash damage is devastating. Ability two: take complete control of any surviving enemy unit for 10 seconds. Make it something big and angry. Ability three: release five infected marines from egg-sacs on its back. The resulting chaos might not win the match, but it will significantly dent any economy and distract your enemy.

The first moments playing *StarCraft II* are overwhelming, and not just because

of the mechanics. When you start playing you're hit by a wave of nostalgia. The sounds and music have the same feel as of old. The same laconic guitar themes, the same sarcastic responses from your foot-soldiers. The interface is near identical, but with tweaks pioneered elsewhere: idle units can be selected by tapping the tilde key, while *StarCraft*'s old and baffling selection limit has been removed. The gatherer units are the same: fleshy drones for the Zerg, floating eyeball probes for the Protoss, and SCVs—men in robot suits—for the Terrans.

The same basic tricks still work—Terrans can blockade the front of your base with farms and supply depots. The Zerg can expand early with a truly unholy number of Zerglings, then rush them right into the cen-



Aerial units can cause chaos when used effectively.



Elevation matters. Melee units will have to find a new path to attack my Siege Tanks.



Most turrets will both detect stealthed units and shoot them.

It's impossible to overstate how powerful that rush of nostalgia is.

ter of an enemy base. The Protoss can still warp their armies from one base to another via their pylon networks.

It's impossible to overstate how powerful that rush of nostalgia is. Sitting down to play is like revisiting 1996. It's like riding a bike. Except the bike needs a constant supply of vespene, and there's another cyclist out there looking to murder you.

NEW AND IMPROVED

What has changed is the single-player campaign. The big news is difficult to swallow: *StarCraft II* will have just a single campaign, for the Terrans, subtitled *Wings of Liberty*. Campaigns for the Zerg and Protoss will follow in standalone expansion packs (working titles: *Heart of the Swarm* and *Legacy of the Void*) in much the same way expansions for *Dawn of War* and *Company of Heroes* include new single-player campaigns. But don't think that *StarCraft II*'s single-player is lacking: it will come with 26–30 missions, and you might find it more branched and open than you'd expect.

As Browder explains it, you'll be able to choose your missions and route through the story, dependent on the rewards. In the course of building *StarCraft II*, the team at Blizzard built dozens of units to test ideas that didn't make it into the multiplayer game: old favorites like the Firebat (a flamethrower infantry unit—the perfect counter to a Zerg rush), or Wraiths (a triple-wing air-and-space superiority

fighter). Those units are in place in the single-player campaign.

Each mission completed will reward you with either a new unit or an upgrade to an existing unit. The idea, Browder explains, is that “your single-player army will look nothing like your multiplayer army.” He gives a practical example: “It might be that you get the medic, and decide the medic is awesome, and so you buy lots of upgrades for him. Or you may find that you think ‘the medic is OK, but I use my marauders a lot (jump-jet troopers that bounce along the ground and over cliffs—they're spectacular economy raiders). I missed out in a few upgrades in the last mission, so I'm going to spend my cash on upgrading my marauders.’ Each mission unlocks a single unit, and that unit is key to that mission, even if they're useful for all the other missions. Each unit has two additional upgrades that you can choose to purchase for cash.” The excuse Browder gives for throwing fans a few favorites? “Raynor is a down-and-out freedom fighter and he's forced to use some older technology. So he uses Wraiths.”

That isn't the only improvement to *StarCraft II*'s storytelling mechanics. In between missions, you'll retire to the Hyperion, a battered and bruised battleship owned by the hero of the hour, Jim Raynor (see Who's Who boxout). There, you'll catch up on the latest news, talk to the crew, settle down for booze in the bar, or order the ship to warp to a new planet.

BALANCE HARD

Making this campaign work is a big job for Blizzard and Browder's team. While other RTS games have experimented with non-linear campaigns (such as *Dawn of War II*'s RPG-lite story or *Red Alert 3*'s Risk-style

map), rarely have they allowed for such massive differentiation in the rewards given to players. “We've never created a non-linear campaign like this before,” Browder acknowledges. “It really changes the way you play an RTS. There are a lot of balance problems we're trying to deal with. We're working on the units to make sure they're distinct from each other.”

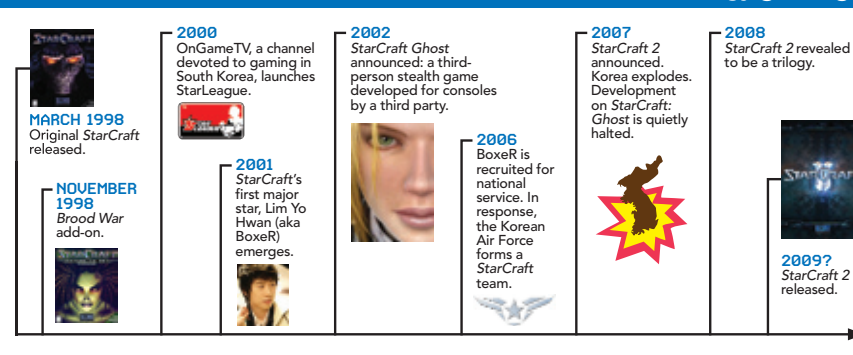
That scale of problem goes some way to explaining why Blizzard has split their three campaigns into three different games. But it doesn't make the waiting any easier. Even if *StarCraft II* comes out this year (and that's probable, but not confirmed), we have no idea when the two further expansions will be released. Given some very quick back-of-the-napkin math, we could still be waiting for the end of *StarCraft 2* in 2011. And still be playing in 2012. And probably beyond.

Put that to Browder, and he lets out a near panicky laugh. “Oh God, I hope not. I hope we can have all three games out before then, but this is my first game at Blizzard...oh God. Maybe you're right. We should say that we want to get the next chapter of story out as soon as possible... Oh God.”

In the meantime, my base is overrun. While I was holding out against the ground threat, my German journo opponent was building Hydralisks and Banelings. The Banelings crawl up to my farms and blow a hole in the defense. The Hydralisks follow, decimating my last line. It's over. We quit and immediately reload. We want to play again. And again and again.

It's a very GG. ☺

THE HISTORY OF STARCRAFT The rise and rise of strategy gaming



REVIEWS

The Sims 3

+++ PCG0709 REVIEWS +++



Let's get this out of the way up front: *The Sims* is a virtual dollhouse. It's not what most hardcore PC gamers (like myself) typically think of as primo entertainment. Instead, it's the game we get for our non-gaming girlfriends to introduce them to our hobby. That's why when I first sit down to play a new *Sims* game, I'm always a little reluctant. ►►

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0-30%

INTOLERABLE

A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45%

WEAK

Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60%

MEDIOCRE

A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61-75%

FAIR

A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89%

GOOD

Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

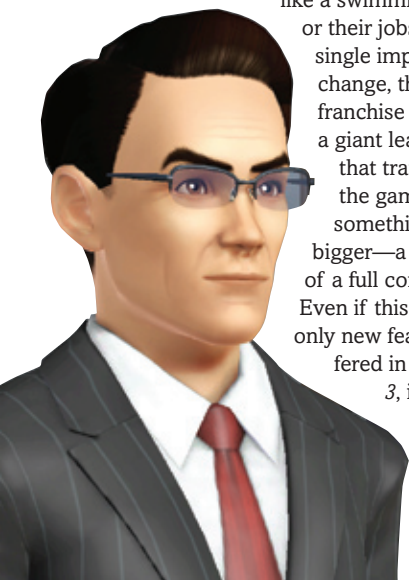


It's a great big world out there, populated by dozens of other Sims.

►► But there's a second, shameful secret reason for my hesitation: I know that I will inevitably become hooked, trapped in a world of guilty pleasures where I'm forced to enjoy myself in spite of my preconceptions.

This time that's especially true, because *The Sims 3* obliterates the primary annoyance that made me quit playing its predecessor: the interminable loading screens every time I wanted to do something outside my Sims' residence, and another when I wanted to return. The initial load time is still above average, but now, instead of loading a single lot at a time, you load the *entire town*, and your Sims can roam freely among private houses, public places

like a swimming pool, or their jobs. With this single impressive change, the *Sims* franchise has taken a giant leap forward that transforms the game into something much bigger—a simulation of a full community. Even if this was the only new feature offered in *The Sims 3*, it would make it an instant



Sim-Colbert put my Sims on notice.



Translation: your mother is a llama!



Traits like Daredevil and Evil make everyday activities more intense.



Dance party at the Goths' house! Most requested song: Monster Mash.



Roaming the neighborhood is a great way to meet people, or to boast to random children.

buy for any fan of the previous games. It would be even better if you could smoothly zoom in and out with the mouse wheel, rather than getting stopped halfway to push a button that zooms into and out of town view, but it's still incredibly liberating.

Speaking of liberating, if there was a guiding principle to *The Sims 3*'s design philosophy, it must have been: "If you don't want to do something, we won't force you."

Don't want your Sims to age and die? Turn that off. Don't want them to show any free will? There's a slider for that. Don't want to make a Sim? Hit the random button. Don't want to build a house? Buy one. Don't want to buy new furniture when you move in? Buy it furnished. It's amazing to see a developer put enormous effort into creating features as complex as building your home, then inviting players to *skip right over them*—

but that's exactly what EA has done here. Revolutionary changes in scope and flexibility aside, *The Sims 3* remains a game about time management. Your job is to nudge your little people toward accomplishing things while simultaneously looking after all their basic needs. Those basics remain the same, but the way the Sims interact with one another has been greatly enhanced by a massively increased variety in Sim personalities.

STARTING A NEW GAME introduces you to the revamped character creation system, including the new Traits. Each adult Sim can have up to five of more than 60 available Traits, such as Good, Genius, Hot Headed, Light Sleeper, Flirty or Evil, which give them bonuses to certain skills or change the options they have when interacting with other Sims. You also pick a single Lifetime Goal based on their Traits, such as reaching the top of a profession or writing a great book, but it doesn't define a Sim the way the Aspirations of *Sims 2* did. Sim interaction is still a simple sort of minigame in which you identify what the other Sim likes and dislikes, then select options appropriately, but it's a slightly deeper minigame now.

THE UNUSUAL EXPLOITS OF GAYLORD MONOBROW

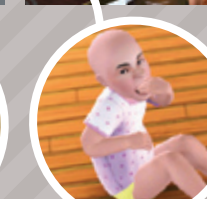
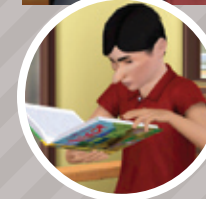
The *Sims 3* doesn't limit you to playing by the rules. I created a Sim by the name of Gaylord Monobrow with a Cyrano de Bergerac-style nose and the Evil, Mean-Spirited, Genius, Flirt, and Charming Traits, then decided his sole purpose in life would be to pass down his hideous nose to an entire generation of Sims.

The game requires you to buy a lot to call home at the beginning, but you don't have to build on it. Instead, Gaylord immediately went next door to a large house shared by four sexy roommate Sims, and he quickly charmed and flirted his way into an invitation to stay the night. Before the sun came up he'd knocked up one of his hosts, and after partaking of their food and using their toilet and shower, Gaylord left to find another baby mama. After repeating his feat across the street the next night, he returned to the first house to seduce another roommate. Even though his lifetime aspiration was to become a Master of Evil (level 10 of the criminal career track), Gaylord soon earned enough Lifetime Reward points to purchase the Attractive reward, making him even more potent a ladykiller.

At last count, Gaylord has fathered a dozen hideous offspring by 10 different mothers, most of whom now hate his guts for hitting on all their friends. He still has no home, preferring to shower at the gym and to eat at the local diner, where he has purchased a partnership in the business to provide a weekly stipend of income.



He makes a great first impression, but his mooching wears out his welcome the next morning.





The Moodlet Manager is the standout Lifetime Reward. Just watch out when it backfires!

Superficially, Sims (and the entire world, really) are more detailed and more natural-looking. Not a big change, but just enough to remind you that you're not playing *The Sims 2* anymore. You get some new body options—you finally have sliders to access the spectrum of shapes between "fit" and "fat." Plus, you can customize the color schemes of hair and clothing to your liking, a tremendous improvement that removes the need to fiddle with mods to get a unique-looking Sim. It's no *Spore* creature creator, but I ended up spending at least a couple of hours happily tweaking faces using the detailed control options (there are also quick and easy options) until I came up with reasonable facsimiles of myself, my friends and coworkers, and Stephen Colbert.

THE NEW PERSONALITIES LEAD to the second most impressive thing about *The Sims 3*, which is how it finds ways to reward you for doing whatever the hell you want. Playing in a sandbox this big threatens to be directionless, but the system of Wants (small-to-medium-sized goals constantly given to each Sim) makes sure that you always have something to work toward—if you want it. For example, my Sim might start out wanting to learn to play the guitar



This is a scientific simulation of what would happen, hypothetically, if two hot chicks made out.

because of his Traits, but if I ignore that and have him play some chess, then chess-related Wants will start to pop up. Whatever you choose to do, your Sim will want to do more of and get better at. Sometimes the system goes a little screwy—I had a Sim with the Bookworm Trait running back and forth between the library and the bookstore several times because repetitive Wants kept popping up—but for the most part it works very well.

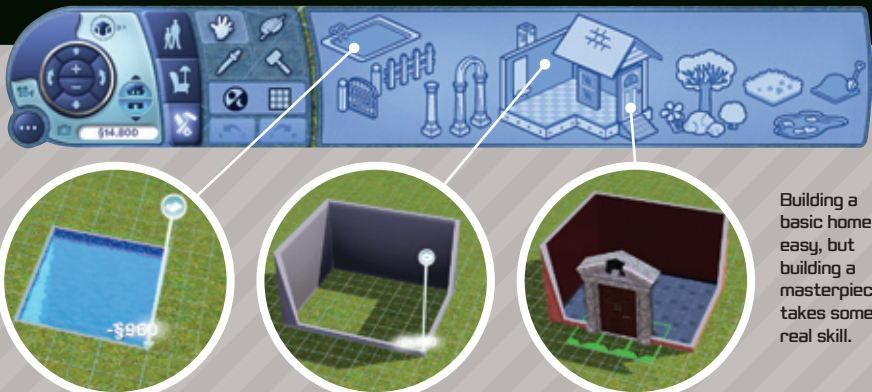
Completing a Want gives your Sim a mood bonus, and also earns you some

Playing in a sandbox this big threatens to be directionless, but the Wants give you something to work toward.

SIM CRIBS



Building and decorating a home are essentially their own games in *The Sims*. Equipped with infinite money cheat codes (the old *Sims* standards still work here), aspiring architects can build some very impressive and creative homes with the easy-to-use toolset. I particularly liked the new building and purchasing interface, which lets you



Building a basic home is easy, but building a masterpiece takes some real skill.

sort by function or visuals. In the latter mode, you can click on the parts of a picture of a house—for example, a wall—to access the wall-building tool. It's very intuitive, and only rarely did I have trouble finding what I was looking for. The other major improvement I noticed is the ability to position furniture diagonally, which was sorely missing before.



You can tell a lot about someone by rummaging through their trash.



"Ma'am, I'd like to ask a few questions about your shorts."

Lifetime Reward points. Sounds great, but the selection of actual rewards is a little disappointing. They're mostly minor bonuses, like Hardly Hungry (your Sim needs to eat less frequently) or Attractive (exactly what you think). Compared to *The Sims 2*'s goofy Money Tree, Love Tub and Elixir of Life, they lack the zaniness and usefulness of the last game's items. Once you discover this, the drive to complete Wants diminishes a bit.

The enhanced careers, on the other hand, remain interesting from start to finish. Your Sims still disappear inside their place of business every work day, but their careers now influence their lives outside of work. For example, once my journalist Sim was promoted from paperboy to reporter, in order to advance further he had to interview other Sims and then write articles about them. Best of all: He could rummage through other

Sims' trash to dig up dirt. I actually want to climb all the career ladders now to see what other random extras come with them.

ALL THIS NEW EXCITEMENT can tire out a Sim, which leads to a minor pacing problem the series *still* hasn't fixed: that (almost) inescapable eight hours of sleep Sims require. Even when you max out the time acceleration, you're still stuck creepily peeping at them sleeping for almost a minute while they recharge their batteries. An "even faster" speed could have made this problem go away. Another problem that has long plagued Sim-kind is pathfinding—while Sims are generally very competent at finding a route from point A to point B, that goes out the window when they cross paths, leading to frequent and annoying "No, after you" standoffs.

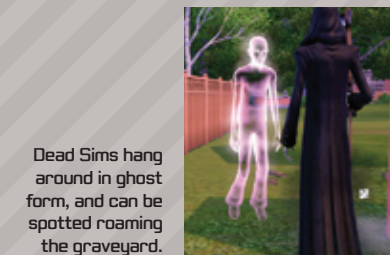
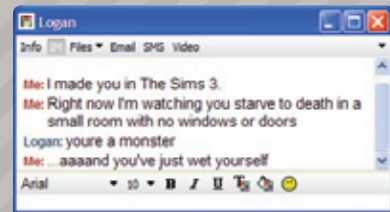
I also wasn't enamored of the new inventory system, which is used for certain Opportunities (random quest-like events) and tasks like gardening and collecting (two chores, by the way, that the in-game tutorials do a poor job of explaining). It adds too much complexity to the game, and sometimes your Sims will do strange things with it. For most of his life, one of my Sims had a bad moodlet because he smelled a pile of trash. I couldn't find it, and neither could a maid. It turned out my Sim had picked up the trash and was carrying it in his inventory like a hobo.

Other than that strange behavior, my experience was mostly bug-free, though I did throw a party that never technically ended (so I couldn't throw another one), and a "go home" button that appeared on my Sims' portraits while they were out didn't seem to work.

WITH THE RELEASE of *The Sims 3*, the countdown has now begun until the flood of expansions start to add more towns, pets, Sim-run businesses, college dorm rooms and bajillions of accessories (these are what make the series a real money-machine for EA). While there's clearly room to grow, *The Sims 3* won't leave you feeling like you've purchased just half a game. After spending many hours with it, I still feel like I've seen only a fraction of what it has to offer. There's tons to do, yet you

SIMICIDE

I confess: One of the first things I did was kill a Sim. Mainstays of the series, such as inviting over the neighbors, switching to build mode, and walling them into a windowless, doorless room until they die of starvation (it takes quite a while) still work like a charm, though I'm disappointed that after three outings the doomed Sims still have no real awareness of their predicament—they just stand there and say "I think it's time for me to go home" and yell about having to go to the bathroom. To their credit, they've finally learned to hoist themselves out of a swimming pool if you delete the ladder rather than drowning.



Dead Sims hang around in ghost form, and can be spotted roaming the graveyard.

barely *have* to do anything at all, so you can focus on the parts of the game that you enjoy the most and play the hell out of them. This kind of game design might be inefficient from a developer standpoint, but it allows the game to be what each player wants it to be. You can't please *everyone*, but *The Sims 3* will please more than most games can hope to. **DAN STAPLETON**

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

BOTTOM LINE// The best *Sims* game yet. It's still about playing with virtual dolls, but it's never been this big, beautiful and eager to please.



*** EDITORS' CHOICE ***

VITALS ■ WHAT IS IT? A virtual world where you benevolently (or malevolently) control every aspect of life. **INFLUENCED BY** *SimCity*, dolls, a higher power **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo E7200, 512MB GeForce 7800GTX/Radeon HD2600 XT, 3GB RAM (or a moderately beefy laptop) **ALTERNATIVELY** Real life (100%), *The Sims 2* (95%) **COPY PROTECTION** Keycode, requires disc in drive **EXPECT TO PAY** \$50 **RELEASE** June 2 **PUBLISHER** EA **DEVELOPER** The Sims Studio **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** www.thesims.com **ESRB** T



Demigod displays more imagination than a dozen WWII strategy games.

Demigod

■ ONE OF THE GODS HAS FALLEN—THIS IS YOUR CHANCE TO REPLACE HIM. THE PROBLEM? THE OTHER SEVEN APPLICANTS

Demigod is gloriously bombastic, the introductory cutscene intoning the slight backstory in its best, booming Christopher Lee voice. One of the gods has been destroyed after leaking company secrets. As one of eight monstrous, magical demigods, you're fighting for promotion to the suddenly vacant position of *Totalgod*.

The story needs no greater depth than this because there's no campaign. You simply battle in individual skirmishes or larger tournaments against bots and other people, the various demigods separated inconsequentially into two teams for the event: the Forces of Light and the Forces of Darkness.

On their surface, these fights resemble traditional RTS, albeit focused upon one unit. Succinctly, you point and click to tell your demigod where to go and what to hit.

Battle takes place across eight maps, each small and symmetrical, covered with capturable flags and enormous Grecian

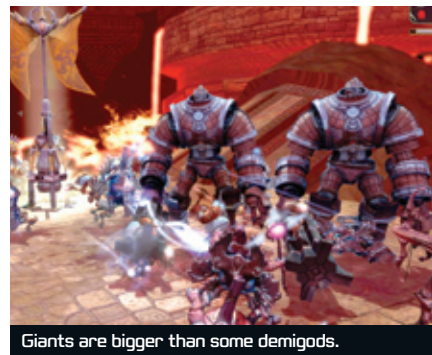
statues. It's an appropriately decadent stage for battles between hulking immortals and the AI minions at their feet. One map is surrounded by beautiful waterfalls, another takes place atop the coiled body of a two-headed snake, gripped in the hands of a screaming statue that floats in space.

These battles start small, but by the end levels are obscured by giants, demons and blubberous priests, all casting magic, throwing boulders and wreaking havoc.

Beneath this lies a core of action roleplaying, where instead of building a base you're growing your character by gaining experience, choosing skills and purchasing armor



Fire demon on one side, Angel on the other.



Giants are bigger than some demigods.



Castles: more fun when attacked by dinosaurs.

and magical items that provide buffs. In other words, your demigod *is* your base.

Except for your base, which I'll come back to in a minute.

The demigod-as-base idea is best exemplified in the game's most iconic character: the Rook. The largest of *Demigod's* semi-deities, the Rook is an anthropomorphic castle imbued with all the wist and sorrow of one of the massive creatures from *Shadow of the Colossus* or something out of a Miyazaki film. He looks enormously cool, and he's the first demigod I played. Either by design or by coincidence, this proved a good call, as he's the easiest to grasp in a game that suffers from having no tutorial and no hint system. Despite this lack of knowledge, by the end of my first skirmish I'd leveled up my Rook to the point where his left shoulder was full of archers, his right shoulder was a kind of automatically firing Tesla coil, while a central tower balanced a trebuchet.

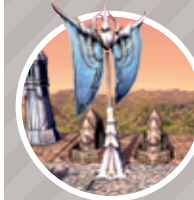
While the Rook is immediately appealing, the other demigod designs don't make a similarly immediate connection. The game is all about the demigods, and it's

His left shoulder was full of archers, while his right was a kind of automatic Tesla coil.

their distinct attributes that make the game a delight, rather than the game modes. But you may have to play each at length for those beautiful-on-the-inside attributes to become clear. In early matches I dismissed Regulus, an angelic sniper designed for ranged combat, as too weak to be useful. Then I realized that his skills, enhanced

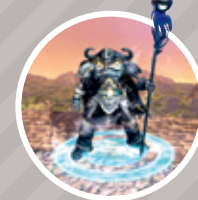
FOUR HOLY WARS

Demigod's highly customizable modes



Dominate

Score the most points by controlling bonus-giving flags.



Slaughter

Kill a set number of enemy demigods—20 by default.



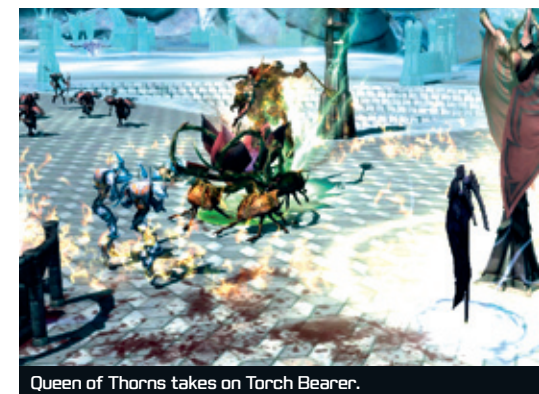
Conquest

Destroy the enemy's citadel by breaching their defenses.



Fortress

Destroy the enemy's fortresses around the level—usually five.



Queen of Thorns takes on Torch Bearer.

through leveling and judicious item purchases, make him great for protecting control points with mines and felling fleeing enemies with a single shot. Plus, tell him to walk somewhere and he'll occasionally say, "This would be faster with wings," and then you get a skill that *lets him grow wings*.

ALL OF THE DEMIGODS have at least one thing that falls into this category: an idea that is silly, or extreme, but ultimately cool in a 12-year-old high-five comic book kind of way. Both the Rook and Regulus are Assassins, one of *Demigod's* two classes, and do most of their fighting themselves. Their two remaining classmates are Unclean Beast, a roaring, lizard-tailed creature with the ability to spread the plague, and Torch Bearer, who can use ice magic to slow and debuff enemies and with the click of a button "relieve his fiery death." That is, burst into flame and use fire magic to damage them directly. While burning, he repeatedly screams, and switching back to ice magic afterward is described as "ending his suffering." Again, *cool*.

The other class of demigods are the



Generals, who while still possessing considerable personal strength rely on summoned minions to aid them, making the game slightly more like a traditional RTS. Oak is your best entry point, possessing enough strength to withstand melee fights while also able to reap the souls of his enemy's fallen minions. Once you're comfortable commanding troops, you can move on to trying the Queen of Thorns, a buxom lady floating above a plant held aloft on the backs of beetles; Sedna, who rides atop a giant cat and summons yetis to her cause; and the vampiric, pointy-eared Lord Erberus, who can reap souls, but also turn into a painful mist.

Using the Generals, there are moments when swarming enemies with minions is hugely satisfying, and times when it simply becomes confusing as to whether my guys are still alive amongst the ruckus of laser blasts and area of effect spells. It's all colorful and beautiful, but it's not

always informative.

The distinctive demigods, and the different tactics required in the four game types (see Four Holy Wars boxout), make it interesting to see which character combinations prove most useful. Conquest and Fortress require direct assaults on defensive turrets, for example. Sadly, this can cause matches

to quickly become attritional, the inevitable winner clear long before the finish, and fights against turrets fixed in place by a level designer are a lot less fun than fighting giant monsters.

Those turrets, though fixed, can be upgraded via the citadel at the center of your other, more traditional base. Trekking back here from the frontlines is tedious,

but there are big rewards to upgrading. None more obvious than the changes you can make to your minion reinforcements, who spawn from portals bracketing each map. These aren't controllable by anyone, even Generals, but flow through the map on a fixed path to clash against the enemy's

I've had nothing but fun playing online—when it's worked.

THE SKILLS OF A TREE

Tracking The Oak's skill progression

LAST STAND I Upon death Oak gets 10 seconds of last chance fervor with which to smite his smiter.



SURGE OF FAITH I Raising his axe skyward, The Oak pushes out a blast of faith that injures his enemies.



RAISE DEAD WARD IV Plant a flag near to which the souls of dying enemies may join you. Higher levels means more souls.



minions. It's by these creatures' progress that you can tell the status of a battle. Upgrading at the citadel leads to new, larger creatures joining your side: first clerics, later the excellently named catapultasaurii, and lastly concrete-stick wielding giants bigger than most of the demigods.

You accrue in-game money as you go, and if you're not interested in spending it to benefit your team, you can instead benefit yourself by purchasing artifacts and items. This is why I refer to my Rook as *my* Rook. On my second night of play I found myself online, reading forums and advice on character builds. I thought the roleplaying elements would be a nice way of getting RPG fans to play an RTS. It never occurred to me that the opposite was

every bit as true.

I've played and loved roleplaying games before, but not like this. Not where I actually paid attention to the *numbers* operating beneath it all. *Demigod* is a Trojan horse filled with statistics. The Mage Slayer

provides a 40 percent chance on hit to stun the target for 0.2 seconds? Man! I am all over that. That will totally benefit my Rook against faster opponents.

DEMIGOD HAS ABOUT A dozen small but obvious flaws right now—most easily fixable, some bewildering. These include some iffy pathfinding, which is particularly troublesome for generals trying to lead large groups of units. But the one that really matters is that its netcode is very patchy indeed. Joining a game via automatic match-making, the server browser, or even a friends list, is a perilous process where a single player with connection issues

can prevent everyone else from playing the game. I expect this will be quickly fixed, which is why I didn't mention it up front, but at the time of writing, this multiplayer game, with its online matches and scoreboards, is frequently only playable against the computer on on a LAN. That's a travesty.

Yet I've had nothing but fun while playing, both against the AI and when it's worked online. *Demigod's* blending of traditional strategy with RPG stats-based tactics leads to something that at least *feels* new, but it's the unabashedly cartoony voices and over-the-top abilities that make the game fun. GRAHAM SMITH



FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A fantastically imaginative gameworld of gods, dinosaurs and giants, beautiful but messy and poorly explained.

0% BETTER >> 100% **81%**

EXCELLENT

VITALS ■ WHAT IS IT? A fantasy strategy game with experience points and skill trees in place of base-building. **INFLUENCED BY** The DotA mod for *Warcraft III* **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 7800/Radeon HD2900, broadband internet **ALTERNATIVELY** *C&C: Red Alert 3* (92%) **COPY PROTECTION** None, but integrates with Stardock's Impulse **EXPECT TO PAY** \$40 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Stardock **DEVELOPER** Gas Powered Games **MULTIPLAYER** Up to 4vs4, skirmish and tournaments **LINK** www.demigodthegame.com **ESRB** T



Zeno Clash

Ghat is a likable lead character, but *Zeno* draws mostly on its captivating art design to tell stories, and this helps distinguish it from other action games.

■ INTIMATE VIOLENCE THAT THINKS OUTSIDE THE BOXING

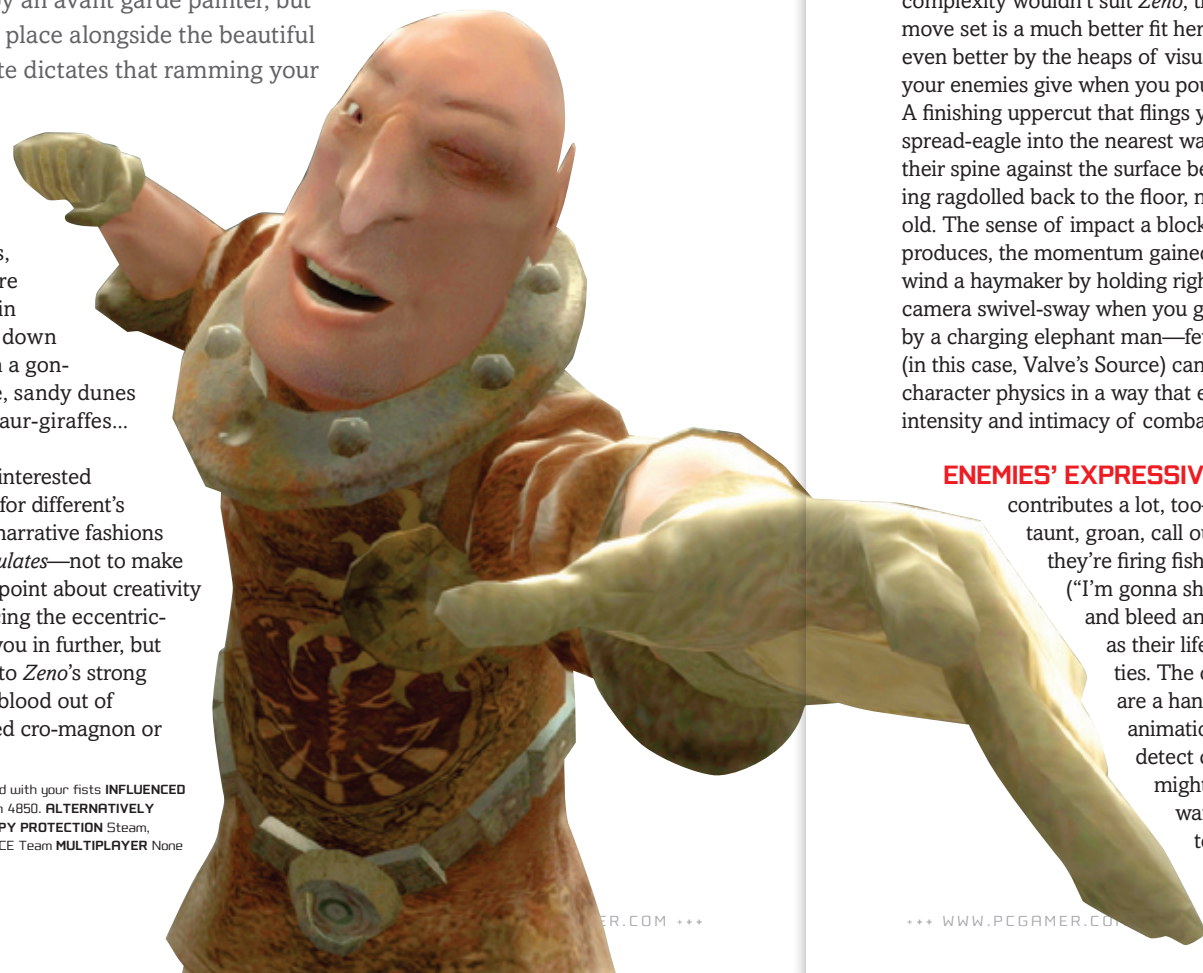
Playing *Zeno Clash* is a little like attending an exhibit by an avant garde painter, but a scheduling snafu led to Wrestlemania XXVI taking place alongside the beautiful landscapes adorning the walls. Conventional etiquette dictates that ramming your knee into a nearby spectator in the presence of a Monet, Dali or Van Gogh demonstrates a lack of class, but in

this case stimulating art and skull-rattling violence mesh together surprisingly well.

Have you heard this story before? Man returns home from introspective personal journey, man kills his androgynous hermaphroditic parent, man flees horde of mutant siblings with girlfriend that has horns coming out of her huge '80s metal hair. I'm guessing not. Your escape from the angry mob of siblings hot on your tail leads you into a spectrum of psychedelic,

borderline-inde-scribable worlds: purple-tree forests, netherworlds where shadow-men lurk in electric fog, floats down midnight rivers on a gondola made of bone, sandy dunes grazed by brontosaur-giraffes... the list goes on.

Zeno Clash isn't interested in being "different for different's sake." The insane narrative fashions a context that *stimulates*—not to make some high-falutin' point about creativity in gaming. Embracing the eccentricity will only draw you in further, but it's still secondary to *Zeno's* strong suit: punching the blood out of every cartoon-faced cro-magnon or



FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

A completely welcome contrast to anything you've ever played, supported by the most intense first-person fisticuffs we've seen in a game.



VITALS ■ WHAT IS IT? A dreamlike world full of original characters that you pound into the ground with your fists **INFLUENCED BY** *Half-Life 2*, *Alice in Wonderland* **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core 2.4 GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850. **ALTERNATIVELY** *Psychonauts* (90%). Under the influence of hallucinogens, box a large man wearing an elephant hide. **COPY PROTECTION** Steam, Direct2Drive **EXPECT TO PAY** \$20 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Steam, Direct2Drive **DEVELOPER** ACE Team **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** www.zenoclash.com **ESRB** N/A

SQUIRREL BOMBS: THE SILENT KILLER

A PC Gamer Special Report

Squirrels: nature's deadliest bushy-tailed bomb. After you become a fugitive from your family, you are pursued by a Hunter, a blind mercenary with an unconventional tracking technique: explosive squirrel sonar. The assassin tosses parachuting nut-hunters from a high perch, scampering scuridae that mingle at your feet, and squeak when they're close so he knows where to shoot. A timely kick will keep squirrels at bay, but don't let your conscience affect your defenses—when they're strapped to tiny barrels of gunpowder, they're already dead.



thing-that-looks-like-a-humanoid-kiwi dumb enough to get in your grill.

First-person fighting grounds the game in familiar mechanics, but turns the familiar into the exotic with intensely physical hand-to-hand combat, dual trout pistols, bone swords, and double-crossbows that launch skulls at enemies. You won't be executing any complex combos, but *Street Fighter*-style complexity wouldn't suit *Zeno*; the simple move set is a much better fit here, and made even better by the heaps of visual feedback your enemies give when you pound on 'em. A finishing uppercut that flings your foes spread-eagle into the nearest wall, banging their spine against the surface before sliding ragdolled back to the floor, never gets old. The sense of impact a blocked punch produces, the momentum gained when you wind a haymaker by holding right-click, the camera swivel-sway when you get smashed by a charging elephant man—few engines (in this case, Valve's Source) can render character physics in a way that elevates the intensity and intimacy of combat this well.

ENEMIES' EXPRESSIVENESS

contributes a lot, too—they'll taunt, groan, call out when they're firing fishguns at you ("I'm gonna shoot'cha!") and bleed and bruise up as their life bar empties. The only outliers are a handful of animations that don't detect collision (you might have to wait for a thug to finish his

"getting up off the ground" animation before you can hit him) and a sticky lock-on system that often stays tethered to enemies when you want to look away.

Zeno's other flaws are almost as minor. The elephant men minibosses you encounter rely too heavily on a charge attack, making the fights quickly settle into a predictable bull-dodging pattern: wait, evade, hit 'em from behind with a club. Along those lines, most of *Zeno's* five boss encounters boil down to basic mechanics that you've seen in other games. But these aren't really detractors—just unsatisfying aspects that don't line up with *Zeno's* otherwise steady originality.

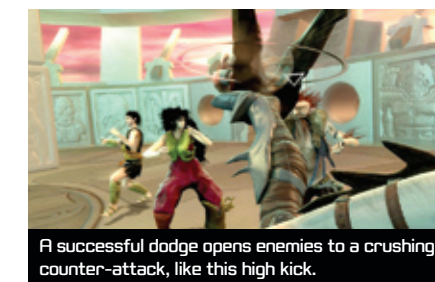
So overpowering is the physicality of *Zeno Clash's* combat, so adjective-escaping is the surreal art design, that you're able to shrug most of this off for the whole of what



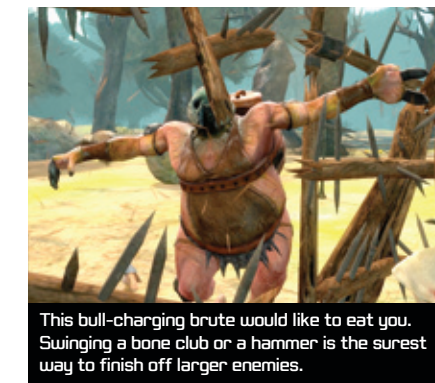
Part of the pleasure in *Zeno Clash's* weird characters is punching their odd faces in.

you're getting: a ticket to five or six hours in freeing context that defies the notion that the action genre is reserved for space marines, paratroopers, enchanted plate mail and colorful mascots. (A saving grace—and source of replay value—is a satisfying challenge mode featuring a dozen-some set of varied battle royale events to work through.) It's a well-spent shift away from the usual genres for anyone worn

out on action/FPS fare, or who still miss the off-beat worlds of '90s PC adventure games (*Grim Fandango*, *Myst*, *Lighthouse: The Dark Being*). And hey, if you get to sock a few parrot men in the beak along the way, so much the better. EVAN LAHTI



A successful dodge opens enemies to a crushing counter-attack, like this high kick.



This bull-charging brute would like to eat you. Swinging a bone club or a hammer is the surest way to finish off larger enemies.



Braid

IT'S A LITTLE LATE IN COMING TO PC, BUT BRAID'S MIND-TWISTING VIOLATIONS OF THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM ARE STILL ASTONISHING TO PLAY.

Since its Xbox 360 release last August, *Braid* has triggered daunting reams of high-minded analysis, meta-criticism and narrative interpretation. Or, in other terms, verbal masturbation.

Which is a shame, because *Braid*'s cleverness and its pretentiousness aren't related. It's a puzzle platformer about time travel, and that's where all the cleverness lies. Six chapters break up the action, and are bookended by snippets of vague, wistful prose about protagonist Tim and the mysterious Princess character he seeks, but these only relate to what you do in tenuous or ridiculously superficial ways.

THE GAME STARTS AS a *Super Mario*-style platformer with comfortingly familiar conventions: mindless enemies trundle up, you jump on their heads to kill them. You find keys, and use them to open locked doors. You collect jigsaw puzzle pieces—two or three per level—and fit them together in a frame at the end of each world to create a pretty picture. For a game that's done things to my brain I didn't think possible, *Braid* is disarmingly cute.

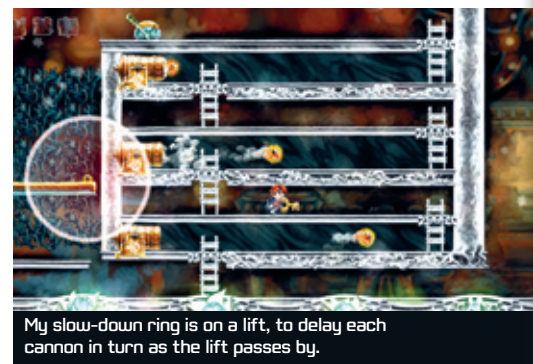
Each of its six worlds has unique temporal quirks. In the first, there is only one: by holding Shift, you can rewind time limitlessly—a split-second to correct a failed jump, or all the way back to the start of the level. There are some jumps that would be fiercely difficult if you couldn't make tiny corrections to your course with momentary rewinds.

As well as its own form of time travel, each world has a different visual motif. The oily art style makes the levels feel hand-painted, cultivating a melancholic, low-fi mood that blends appealingly with the gentle soundtrack. Tim is intentionally awkward in his suit and tie, looking like an accountant who's wandered from his lunch break into a waking dream.

In the second world, some green-sparkling objects exist in a timeline that's always moving forward. Open a green-sparkling door, then rewind: It'll stay open while the rest of the world reverts. So *Braid* becomes a game about using your rewind



Two doors, one key, but no green sparkles. Uh oh.



My slow-down ring is on a lift, to delay each cannon in turn as the lift passes by.

Braid actually makes you a better, more versatile thinker.

ability as a tool, pulling parts of the world back through time while others plough on, until the two align to your liking.

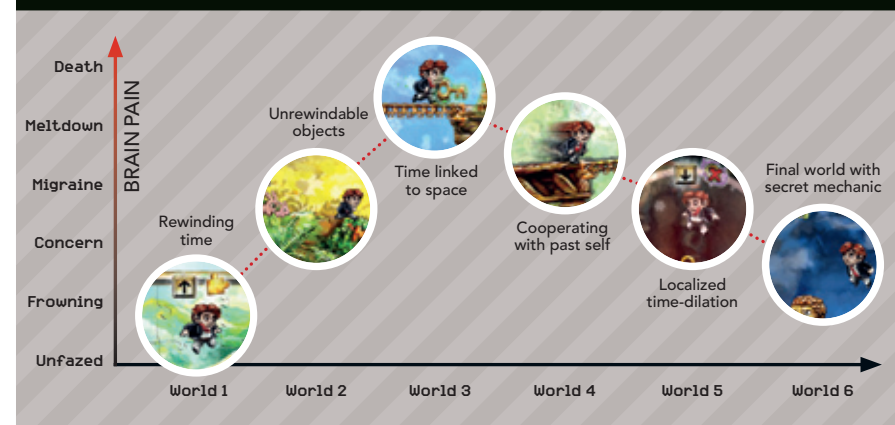
Everything you do is impossible. And it looks impossible: Some essential puzzle pieces dangle so absurdly in the middle of nowhere, so obviously unattainable, that you want to laugh. But with two rather irritating exceptions, every one of them can actually be reached the first time you see them by thinking nimbly, laterally, inquisitively and most of all inventively.

Aside from the pieces you can't immediately reach, there are two other bad puzzles in *Braid*: one that's just fiddly even once you understand it, and one that has a tempting but wrong solution that distracts you from the less logical real one. But these are four among more than 60, and the rest are exemplary.

Skipping ahead to the fifth world, Tim gets a ring that slows down time. It creates a visible bubble of slowness, from near-static at its center to barely affected at its edges, so you can tinker with the timing of every cog in the machine of a *Braid* level. It's less brain-melting than most of the previous worlds, but its levels leverage the tricks you've already learned to produce some hugely elaborate puzzles.

MINIMUM MIND REQUIREMENTS

Charting the strain *Braid*'s six worlds put on your head.



At this point, you can't progress any further until you've collected all 60 puzzle pieces. The sudden introduction of such a strict requirement after *Braid* has been so forgiving is jarring, but wise. Each puzzle piece requires a different leap of logic to acquire, and you're missing the best of *Braid* if you don't force your mind to perform even the most lurching of them.

THE SIXTH WORLD IS unlike the others: I won't spoil the game for you by saying how, but it's a quirk so neat that it seems obvious once you discover it. This is a brief chapter, but its conclusion is *Braid*'s crowning twist. It's the first occasion the time manipulation and allegorical plot really gel, and they do it to heartbreaking effect.

It's a magnificent moment: a revelation you perform without even realizing you're

doing it. But the impact of that scene is blunted slightly by a cloudy epilogue with fiddly secret bits, when a lonely full stop would have twisted the knife unbearably. Instead it returns to disjointed stories of the princess, interpretable variously as a lover, a mother and the atomic bomb.

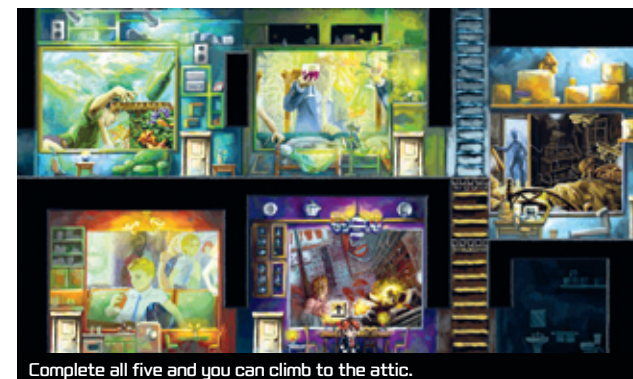
The one prevailing theme with the various roles the Princess takes on is obsession: its grip on Tim, its destructive effect on his life, and his blindness to it. And this bears mention because it does, secretly, relate to an aspect of the game.

Braid is the brain's gymnasium. It's a game so intellectually engaging that it actually makes you a better, more versatile thinker. It's a challenging game dressed up as a nigh-impossible one: You won't always feel it, but you *are* smart enough to complete it.

TOM FRANCIS



Complete a world, and you complete its puzzle



Complete all five and you can climb to the attic.

VITALS ■ WHAT IS IT? Time-traveling puzzle platformer that's easy on the eye and heavy on the mind. **INFLUENCED BY** *Super Mario Bros.*, *Donkey Kong*, *Einstein* **PLAY IT ON** 2.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Radeon X1950 / GeForce 8600GS **ALTERNATIVELY** *Portal* (94%) **COPY PROTECTION** Platform specific (e.g., Steam) **EXPECT TO PAY** \$15 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Steam, Impulse, Greenhouse **DEVELOPER** Number None **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** braid-game.com **ESRB** E10+

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Dizzying, baffling and staggeringly clever. It's a game that uses parts of your brain you didn't know you had.

0% BETTER >> 100% **92%**

♦♦ EDITORS' CHOICE ♦♦



It's like the Vulcan mind-meld, except instead of reading his mind you rip his head off and throw it like a grenade.

Merchants of Brooklyn

COMIC BOOK STYLE GRAPHICS LOOK HOT, BUT THE BROKEN GAMEPLAY IS NOT

If you were making a game on a tight budget, what would you cut first? Paleo Entertainment chose to forgo instructions, game stability, AI, voice acting and character quality, among other things. They made the wrong call.

As a straightforward run'n'gun budget title set in a post-apocalyptic New York populated with cloned Neanderthal slaves-turned-gladiators, *MoB* does an adequate job of periodically providing new and interesting weapons to ruthlessly brutalize the soulless clones marching in your general direction. My favorite, the Money Shot, rapidly fires bouncy radioactive balls that cause enemies to keel over and spew out their gooey green insides before collapsing. Even when unarmed, every

enemy you face is a fleshy piñata begging to be smashed apart for arms, feet and other ambiguous chunks you can charge up with your cybernetic arm and hurl at the deceased's buddies like grenades. Yes, it is as awesome as it sounds, and this tongue-in-cheek gore is *MoB*'s high point. It really makes you wish they'd built a better game around the concept.

THE ATROCIOUS VOICE-OVER IN the opening cutscene mentions cloning, but a mere plot point isn't enough to turn the monotonous act of fighting the same two enemies (modern Neanderthal and flying drone) over and over into entertaining gameplay. Dopey AI compounds the problem as enemies go for long walks off of short rooftops, bump into walls and display stormtrooper-like firing accuracy.

Despite the recycled set pieces and character models, the comic book art style keeps *MoB* interesting to look at for

most of the five-hour experience. Post-catastrophe Brooklyn could have been a cool setting, but it's never fleshed out—the only "story" elements are delivered by a scientist that offers patronizing commentary like "Well you're even more badass than I imagined!"

Perhaps the defining moment that perfectly captures the brokenness and stupidity of *Merchants of Brooklyn* is the final boss, who spawns on a level below you so that he can't even fight back while you shoot him in the head 30 times to usher in the rolling credits you've been dreaming of for the past five hours. That's right—the game's climactic battle is upstaged by slowly moving text on a black background. No art style can make up for that kind of sloppy game design, nor should your five hours be wasted on it. JOSH AUGUSTINE



Playing *MoB* won't make you vomit your guts out and die, but it *will* make you regret buying it.

VITALS ■ **WHAT IS IT?** A gruesome brawler/shooter with an eye-catching art style. **INFLUENCED BY** XIII, repetitive stress disorder **PLAY IT** ON Dual Core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 7800 GT/Radeon X1900 GT **ALTERNATIVELY** Painkiller (84%) **ESRB** Not rated, but if it were it'd be M **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **EXPECT TO PAY** \$10 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Paleo/Steam **DEVELOPER** Paleo **MULTIPLAYER** 32 players, Death Match, Team Death Match **LINK** paleoent.com/mob.html **ESRB** N/A



Notice how these two guys look exactly the same? Get used to it.

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

MoB's terrific art style and wanton dismemberment are completely wasted on this overwhelmingly inadequate shooter.

0% BETTER >> 100% **31%**

♦♦ DON'T BOTHER ♦♦



My level 8 hero sniper puts another notch in his belt in Operation Assault.

COMPANY of HEROES Tales of Valor

WAR NEVER CHANGES, BUT THIS EXPANSION GIVES FANS SOME NEW WAYS TO WAGE IT

There's no "I" in *Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor*, but they probably should've worked one in. Considering the way most of this standalone expansion shifts the focus of one of our favorite real-time strategies from the

company to the individual heroes, it'd certainly be fitting.

Valor offers an evening or two worth of single-player content in the form of three mini-campaigns that incorporate its new gameplay concepts into well-presented but ultimately unchallenging missions. For example, in the Tiger Ace campaign (based on actual events at the Battle of Villers-Bocage) you control a single German Tiger tank as it thunders through British forces as though it was in god mode—earning new abilities from an RPG-like skill tree for even more overkill. Likewise, in the second campaign, Causeway, you control a handful of American infantry squads who might as well be composed entirely of Rambo clones—all you have to do is set them to



In Stonewall, your team must keep the Nazis out of town. We don't like their kind 'round here.

attack-move behind their targets and let them do their thing, occasionally pushing the "revive squad member" button when prompted. The third campaign, Falaise Pocket, offers more of a challenge since you use more conventional *CoH* mechanics (sans base-building) to hold off Allied forces while your wounded German comrades retreat, but it's still only three missions long.

But don't let the paltry single-player offerings dissuade you from the game. The real meat here is in the multiplayer. For the traditional MP battles, *Valor* unlocks all four armies and adds a handful of optional replacement units, such as a beefier armored car for the Americans and British and some alternative tanks and light armor for the Germans. None of them appear to be overpowered, but they do open up some



During the campaigns the screen quickly fills with floating numbers from easily killed enemies.



The Staghound is a manlier alternative to the Greyhound, but it can't be upgraded as much.



Pimp My Tiger Ace!

VITALS ■ **WHAT IS IT?** A standalone expansion for a brilliant real-time strategy game that introduces some new game modes. **INFLUENCED BY** *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II* **PLAY IT ON** P4 3GHz, 2GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Company of Heroes* [96%] **COPY PROTECTION** keycode for single-player; login for multiplayer **EXPECT TO PAY** \$30 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** THQ **DEVELOPER** Relic **MULTIPLAYER** Normal 2-8, Stonewall 2-4, Panzerkrieg 2-6, Assault 2-6 **LINK** companyofheroesgame.com **ESRB** M

WAR MACHINES Joining Operation Panzerkrieg

CANNON FODDER You can call in anti-tank infantry to help defend captured points, but they don't stand a chance against these super-tanks by themselves.

HE'S NO PANSY My opponent's German Panzer IV tank is a beast with powerful, fast-firing main cannon. A frontal assault is a bad idea.



TANK TRAINING As my M18 Hellcat levels up, I gain new abilities like upgraded armor-piercing ammo, long-range recon, stealth ambush, flank speed, and mine laying.

new tactical possibilities. The American/British Staghound light-armored vehicle, for example, comes blazing out of the gate without the need for upgrades like the Greyhound it replaces.

MUCH MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, there are three new modes of play that completely toss out the rule book.

The first, Panzerkrieg, is a light action-RPG where each player controls a single tank that levels up and gains new abilities that you choose from a skill tree. The goal? Reduce the other team's Victory Point pool to zero first. Focusing on controlling a single tank really lets the tactical nature of *CoH*'s armored combat shine: Maneuvering to get that clean shot at the enemy's weaker rear armor can be a riveting game of cat and mouse (in which both drive multi-ton war machines), and smashing through walls with your giant metal beast never gets old. The upgrade abilities, like a speed burst or mine-laying, keep the gameplay evolving from start to finish.

Assault is an infantry game in which you control a single heroic soldier of a chosen class—like a sniper or medic—and fight your way through enemy territory heavily fortified with AI-controlled troops and bunkers to reach and destroy their HQ before they do it to you. The RPG aspects are less interesting than in Panzerkrieg—you can only increase your hero's weapon, armor, or grenade power each level—but you

can swap classes to take advantage of a different set of abilities every time you die. There's less tactical maneuvering, but your army of NPCs does a fine job of making you feel like a soldier in a larger battle. I do wish there were a more realistic means of destroying vehicles and bunkers than shooting them with light arms, though.

My favorite Operation is Stonewall, in which you and up to three other players in co-op defend a small town against 16 increasingly powerful German attack waves. The gameplay here is very similar to traditional *CoH* battle, with no heroes or XP upgrades—the main difference is that you earn resources by killing Germans rather than holding control points. It's very challenging when the armor rolls in, and it's the best way to play co-op against the AI yet.

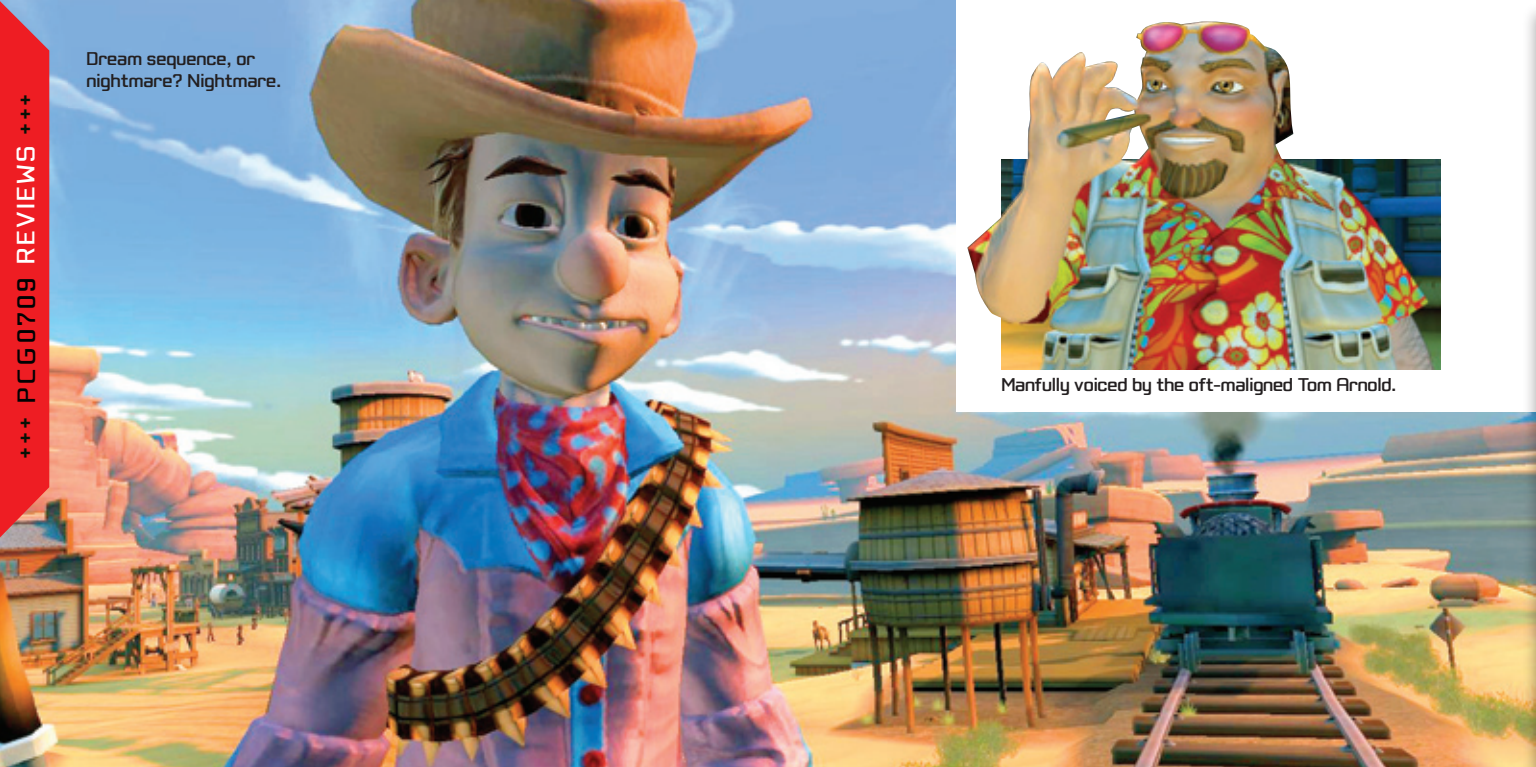
It's too bad that each Operation mode has only one map designed to work with it, making *Valor*'s long-term value entirely dependent on Relic stepping up and delivering more. Their track record is pretty good with that sort of thing, but who wants to wait? Considering that \$20 now buys you the original *CoH* with its magnificent campaign and multiplayer, *Valor* is best suited for dedicated fans seeking a new way to enjoy their favorite game. **DAN STAPLETON**

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Varied new multiplayer modes for an awesome game, hampered by a paucity of maps.



Dream sequence, or nightmare? Nightmare.



Manfully voiced by the oft-maligned Tom Arnold.

LEISURE SUIT LARRY

Box Office Bust

THE LAST OF ITS CLASSIC ADVENTURE GAME ORIGINS STRIPPED AWAY, THIS UNMASKED-FOR SEQUEL TAKES SEX COMEDY SOMEWHERE TRULY PATHETIC

I'd f**k a cliff," says Larry Lovage, in four words perfectly summarizing everything about this abysmal third-person action adventure mess. Unsubtle, moronic and making no sense, this second attempt to reprise the *Leisure Suit Larry* games of the '80s is disastrous.

Unlike the despicable previous attempt, *Magna Cum Laude*, this isn't depraved. It's just dreadful. It's an open-world platform game, limited to a small film studio and occasional forays into fantasy worlds. Lovage, working for his uncle Larry's movie business in Tinseltown, can now double-jump, shimmy along ledges, and drive battery-powered carts.

YOUR FIRST TASK is to scrub graffiti off some walls. Your second is to collect some lost script pages. The third: delivering packages. Ho boy, the sexy fun! Eventually this does lead to nonsensical scenes in which you can talk giant-breasted women into sleeping with you (not shown—Larry's become all mouth and no trousersnake for this outing, hiding all sex off-camera). Also: extended dream sequences where Larry robs banks, fights baddies, fires guns—all

appallingly designed and bafflingly woven into the main story.

Using an unrecognizable Unreal engine, your movement about the cartoon world is a cluster of glitching clips and barely functioning interaction, the spasmodic camera regularly flipping itself 180 degrees for no reason, hurtling Larry off a ledge and sending him to his death. It's agony to try to control—the platforming sequences, fight scenes and shooting galleries are so poor there should be support groups for people who've tried to play them.

All of which makes it a great shame that Team 17 pulled together such a grand cast. Great actors such as Jeffrey Tambor and Jane Lynch are on board, and decent comedians such as Tom Arnold give strong performances. But the words they're saying are gibberish. The opening line sets the tone:

"Who are you calling afraid to f**k himself?" And I'd have been happy to get through my life without having heard Jane Lynch utter, "A man whacked out enough to tongue another man's taint."

It's misogynistic, the assumption being that if you lie to women they'll want to sleep with you, but this is all so poorly executed that it's hard to get worked up over. The hideous quality of the writing is far more offensive than the endless references to "muffs" and "tards." Jokes about Katrina and the Holocaust come and go, mostly ignored because the game just threw you off a roof forcing you to repeat the last hideous 15 minutes of mindless idiocy.

When you finish a challenge there's a lingering gray screen that declares, "You Succeeded!" It never feels like you did.

JOHN WALKER

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT

Boring, buggy, profoundly meaningless and utterly dreadful in every imaginable way. Not just bad—this is novelty bad.



VITALS ■ WHAT IS IT? Third-person action adventure sex comedy, without the action, adventure, sex or comedy. **INFLUENCED BY** *Parky's 3: Revenge* **PLAY IT ON** 3.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB 3D card **ALTERNATIVELY** *Psychonauts* [90%] **COPY PROTECTION** Requires disc in drive **EXPECT TO PAY** \$20 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **DEVELOPER** Team 17 **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** snipurl.com/lslob **ESRB** M

Grand Ages

ROME

CAESAR? I BARELY KNEW HER



Ages is at its grandest at maxi-zoom.

Grand" is not perhaps the best descriptor for a time of plague, slavery and genocide, but presumably the much-abused barrel of strategy game names involving the word "Age" has now been scraped entirely dry. This city-builder may be as unambitious as its name, but it ambles down the middle of the road with reasonable style.

This retitled sequel to last year's *Imperium Romanum* is a lavish reworking of the age-old *Caesar* formula: build, collect, build some more, keep tiny, puppet-like Romans happy, build again. It is, however, wonderfully pretty.

This is not a game you'll tell a hilarious/epic anecdote about, but once you've mastered some of its trickier complexities, there are worse ways to spend a couple of idle days. *GAR*'s worst sin is simply being too ordinary, and in what are fairly fallow times for high-quality city-builder games, its impressively vast towns are more than welcome. Rudimentary RTS-style army building provides bursts of vague adrenaline, but it's stronger when it sticks to sleepily erecting

good-looking temples and farms.

Oddly, *Grand Ages*' pleasing look ends up holding it back a little. There's a sense the artists called one shot too many, as critical interface elements are shoved off-screen in order to provide maximum space for the calming, golden-lit landscapes. Finding out something as simple as how much brick you're generating involves a few too many irritated clicks.

It's far from a deal-breaker, but there's

Its worst sin is simply being too ordinary

similar fiddliness and vagueness throughout, not helped by a weirdly unforgiving domino effect where one minor screw-up too quickly leads to a whole mess of disasters. It's thus best played in its still-challenging sandbox

mode rather than trudging through the overly pushy campaign. *Rome* is not, then, as grand as it claims to be, but it's big and beautiful enough to get away with it.

ALEC MEER

FINAL PCGAMER VERDICT



VITALS ■ WHAT IS IT? A city-builder with real-time strategy elements. **INFLUENCED BY** *Caesar* **PLAY IT ON** P4 3GHz, 1GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 7600/Radeon X800 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Children of the Nile* [82%] **COPY PROTECTION** Disc check **EXPECT TO PAY** \$40 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Kalypso Media **DEVELOPER** Haemimont **MULTIPLAYER** Co-op, competitive, online **LINK** grandages.com **ESRB** T

MASTER THE MARINES IN DAWN OF WAR II

GUIDE DOW II'S ANGRIEST MEN TO MULTIPLAYER VICTORY

Dawn of War II's multiplayer bears little resemblance to its odd *Diablo/Syndicate* single-player mash-up. It's strange that they even come in the same box—it's like being given a free pair of trousers when you buy a sandwich. In particular, the multiplayer is a lot more complicated: You've got a base to worry about, three resources to grind, a tech tree to climb and upgrades on every unit.

That also means that the tactics you've taught yourself in single-player count for somewhere between diddly and squat in the more intense, precise multiplayer mode. The glorious Assault Marine WOOOSH-BAM! or the BUDDA-BUDDA-DEAD of Avitus' assault cannon are no longer your bread and butter. With that in mind, allow us to offer some essential pointers about using the Space Marines against other players.

DIFFICULTY

Skill: Medium
Time: 4+ hours

VITAL LINKS

- Dow2 multiplayer strategy discussion snipurl.com/enw0h
- Strategy tips from the designer snipurl.com/enw0v
- Space Marine unit guide snipurl.com/enw17



01 SCOUT'S HONOR

Embrace Scouts, the Space Marines' starting squad. In the early game, they can be a monstrously effective spam unit and (more importantly) an inexpensive, agile capping tool. Y'know the speedy *Team Fortress 2* Scout? That's their role. The shotgun upgrade's knockdown is its other benefit, as it gives you time to get away or drop something heavier in. In the late game though, it's useless—multiple backline Sniper Scouts can, however, dominate the battlefield.



02 MMMM... BREAD AND BUTTER...

While Teching up, your base offers vital upgrades. In the Marines' case you don't need to fuss too much about building the expensive, bigger units. Specifically, the Tech 1 Tactical Marines are your bread and butter throughout the game, with three distinct upgrade paths and surprisingly capable hand-to-hand abilities. They may not be walking tanks, but a couple of Tactical Marine squads is usually far more mobile, versatile and useful than a single Dreadnought or Predator.



03 FLEE CIRCUS

Unnoble or not, running away is *incredibly* important. There is no shame in retreat, as replacement units are hugely expensive—especially if they were upgraded. Pressing X activates retreat, which increases run speed and reduces ranged damage by around 80%. As well as that, if your enemy isn't paying attention and neglects to break pursuit, his attackers will follow your cowardly unit halfway across the map—and straight into the crossfire of your main army, or even base turrets.



04 BUYING BIGGER GUNS

Learn the weapon upgrades—it really isn't a case of bigger means better, and once a squad has one they're stuck with it. For instance, giving your Tac Marines missile launchers or plasma guns renders them ineffective against swarms of simple Tyranid gaunts. The Tech 1 Flame-thrower upgrade, on the other hand, demolishes gaunts...but it's useless against Warriors, which are best tackled with Plasma. Simply put, don't invest resources in an upgrade until you have a reasonable sense of what your opponent has.



05 JUST BE ANNOYING

Do not underestimate harassment—keeping an enemy from capping a point is as important as capping it yourself. A cheap unit overwatching a resource node can tie up a capping force for ages by forcing them into a pattern of retreats and returns—and as well as keeping them from grabbing the point, it means those guys are kept out of the main fray elsewhere on the map.



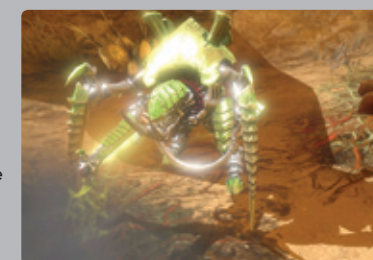
06 NOT SO FAST

Combining your units is doubly important when you're facing agile vehicles, like an Eldar Falcon. Melta-bombs will often fall off if it's moving too fast, and friendly fire could clobber your marines if they don't get clear. The best bet is to use your Force Commander, ideally with the Iron Halo (ultra-health!) and Powerfirst (ultra-damage!) upgrades—he'll stun vehicles long enough for your marines to safely pin some meltas on it. Melta: as fun to say as they are to blow up.



07 THE CARNIE PROBLEM

One of the more enduring questions of *DOW2* is "how the hell do you take down a Tyranid Carnifex?" Despite being vehicle-sized, annoyingly they're considered infantry, which means the Marine Melta-bomb can't be used on them. There is no perfect answer, but if it's a ranged 'Fex, a Terminator-suited Force Commander or Ancient Dreadnought can usually take it in melee. If it's a melee monster, the plasma and missile launcher unlocks for your Tactical and Devastator Marines are the best bet. Beware the lobster-tank!



08 SAME TEAM!

Watch out for friendly fire—it's practically non-existent in single-player, but in multiplayer a Plasma Cannon Devastator squad will burn a massive hole in your other squads' backs if you're foolish enough to right-click them into the line of fire. Even worse, you can't stop them from doing it—they'll open up automatically unless you've toggled them to Hold Fire, which renders them pretty useless.



09 DEVASTATIONARY

Think of Devastators as essentially turrets—they're there for defense, rather than offense. The key is their comfortably wide cone of fire, which means they're excellent for guarding your flanks. Walking them across the map takes a week, and they're horribly vulnerable while undeployed. A good tactic is to camp one near a cap point, then lure the enemy toward the point with something frailer, then watch the Devastators pick 'em off as they approach.



10 I SEE STEALTHED PEOPLE

The Marines aren't too hot at spotting infiltrated/invisible units unless they're right on top of them, which is generally too late. Your best bet—and the game doesn't mention this—is the Scout Sergeant, who's a top invisi-spotter. It's yet another reason to not underestimate your early Scouts; make sure there's a squad amongst your main force, otherwise your expensive units can get silently picked off by those stealthy Eldar bastards.



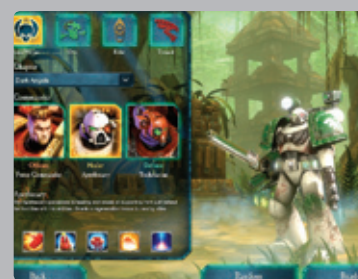
11 IF I HAD A THUNDER HAMMER

Wondering about Force Commander upgrades? Again, this is a case where Tech 3 gear isn't necessarily the best. The T3 Powerfirst smacks vehicles quite well, but its slowness opens your FC up to ranged infantry. Given you'll encounter more of the latter than the former, get your Missile/Plasma Tac Marines to handle the tanks, and grab a Thunder Hammer (Thor would be proud) for the FC. Coupled with the early Iron Halo and Sprint upgrades, he becomes an infantry-demolishing tank all of his own.



12 DR. DEATH

Of the three types available, the Apothecary commander is probably the most challenging to play as. Unlike the Techmarine and Force, he's less useful until the mid/late game. Come T2/3 though (if you equip the Armor of Purity or the Apothecarian and the Power Axe), he switches from a frail healing unit to a fairly fearsome close combat guy. Give him the Purification Rites and his vast area-of-effect heal ability *also* damages nearby enemies. He's tricky, but stick with him and he's probably the best.





HARD STUFF

WITH LOGAN DECKER



92



94

MID-RANGE MELEE

PRICES GO DOWN, FRAMERATES GO UP

Observe the dog as you prepare dinner. His eyes follow your every move, particularly your hands, as you dress and sauté the chicken; as you slide it from the pan to your plate; as you carry the plate to the dinner table. He doesn't move, he only watches. Because the dog instinctively understands that eventually—maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually—everything falls.

For gamers, the proverbial chicken breast just hit the ground. While the latest crop of GPUs from both ATI and Nvidia charge half a grand for performance that may actually exceed what most gamers will require for the next six months or so, the Radeon HD 4890 from ATI and the GeForce GTX 275 from Nvidia deliver more than enough power to run games like *Crysis*, *Far Cry 2* and *GTA IV*—even at 2560x1600—for half the price.

But prices for the last generation of cards are dropping fast as well. Let's find out which generation, and which cards, are a better value for gamers who've been waiting for dinner to drop.

Gigabyte ATI Radeon HD 4890 1GB

\$299, WWW.GIGABYTE.US

While the HD 4890 isn't merely a higher-clocked version of last year's superb HD 4870, it's not a radically different design, either. There



The high-end of mid-range, and priced accordingly.

are, naturally, somewhat higher clock speeds on the core and stream processor (850MHz) as well as the GDDR5 memory (1.9GHz). It requires two six-pin power connectors and looks almost identical to the HD 4870, although the fan is a bit louder. The entire double-slot card is about 9.5 inches long, making it an easier fit on some motherboards than the 10.75-inch GTX 275, although both are roughly the same width.

The benchmarks are impressive, slightly higher than the GTX 275, and particularly in the real-world gaming benchmarks in *Crysis*, *Company of Heroes* and the blast-tastic *World in Conflict*. Although the biggest gains are at the lower resolutions, benchmarks at 2560x1600 meet and exceed most folk's minimum daily requirements. The HD 4890's DirectX 10.1 support continues to be irrelevant.

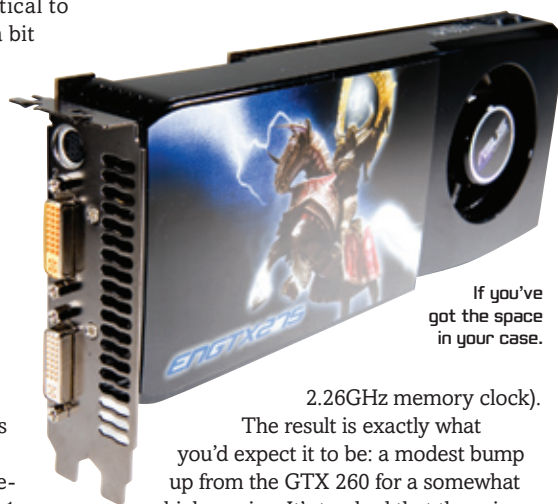
Overshadowed by insane performance on the high end and great bargains on the low end, it's hard for a new mid-range card to stand out. But the HD 4890 does distinguish itself, and once the price drops—and you know it will—it could go from being a good card to an awesome deal.

VERDICT: 86%

Nvidia GeForce GTX 275

\$299, WWW.ASUS.COM

You won't find anything revolutionary inside the hefty chassis of Nvidia's GeForce GTX 275 compared to the GTX 260; it also requires two six-pin power connectors and uses the same GPU, but is clocked higher (633MHz core clock, 1.4GHz stream processor clock, and



If you've got the space in your case.

2.26GHz memory clock).

The result is exactly what you'd expect it to be: a modest bump up from the GTX 260 for a somewhat higher price. It's too bad that the price and the performance don't quite scale like you'd hope it would—many of the performance increases are actually negligible. That said, less than \$300 for a card that can pump 43 frames per second in *Company of Heroes*—at 2560x1600!—is pretty badass. And unlike DirectX 10.1 on the HD 4890 (absent here), CUDA built into the GTX 275 actually has some utility, although still frustratingly limited to a few applications and hardware physics acceleration.

VERDICT: 85%

BENCHMARKS

		1600x1200/2560x1200			
	3DMark06/Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes: QE
Radeon HD 4890	17068/11248	48/21 fps	267/152 fps	48/29 fps	59/58 fps
GeForce GTX 275	17021/13325	37/16 fps	270/168 fps	49/32 fps	59/43 fps

All benchmarks run at 1600x1200 and 2560x1600 under Windows Vista except where noted, with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on. All games run with graphics settings at "high," except where noted. Vantage run at Performance preset. *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full.

IBUYPOWER LAN WARRIOR

GET CARRIED AWAY



Although we associate multiplayer gaming these days mostly with online play, LAN gaming will never become obsolete. You just can't beat playing over a wired network for its minimal lag and the ability to throw real dirt in the faces of opponents who

are pulling ahead of you. The dilemma, of course, is whether you ought to buy a laptop or small formfactor (SFF) system with limited horsepower, or a larger system that's a bitch to haul around. Ibuypower insists that no such compromises are necessary in a LAN gaming rig, and delivers the LAN Warrior to prove it.

The LAN Warrior is a Core i7-920 rig running at the stock clock of 2.66GHz on Asus' Rampage II Gene mATX motherboard. The centerpiece, however, isn't the GeForce GTX 295 or the 128GB solid-state drive in addition to a 1TB hard drive, but instead NZXT's handsome Rogue case with 1/8-inch crossbow-proof aluminum panels on four sides, a hinged, locking front door, and four 120mm fans (both intake fans are filtered).

The LAN Warrior is not an exceptionally light system, and its boxy shape makes it awkward to carry, but the included carrying harness does make schlepping it around much easier (and I can't wait to see someone use it to hang the LAN Warrior from the ceiling, like one of grandma's macramé plant-holders). Another plus: Ibuypower has crafted an exceptionally quiet gaming rig by implementing liquid cooling on the CPU, and the overall heat output on the system—including the air-cooled GPU—is very low. The interior is cleanly arranged and wired, and although the water-cooling prevents the motherboard tray from sliding out, it's easy enough to add RAM through the top or even

add another GTX 295 (a *very* tight fit) by removing the side panel (where you'll also find a lone PCI slot waiting for fulfillment).

THE LOW 3DMARK06 SCORE is easy to shrug off once you glance at the impressive game benchmarks, where the LAN Warrior breezes by machines costing hundreds more (and in the case of last month's FX6800-05 from Gateway, the far less expensive LAN Warrior even offers more features, including a Blu-ray reader and burner).

There's everything to love about the LAN Warrior—it's extremely quiet, stable, well designed, and ripe for overclocking—and very little to grouse about (the benchmarks do seem slightly behind what I'd hope for from these specs). The design and execution of the LAN Warrior represents a level of sophistication I haven't seen from Ibuypower before—and I'm digging it. ☺

It's not exactly roomy inside, but the case does have space for additional components.



Blu-ray in brushed aluminum. Slick.

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: Asus Rampage II Gene X58 mATX
CPU: Intel Core i7-920 2.66GHz
Memory: 6GB DDR3-1600
Video: Nvidia GeForce GTX 295
Storage: RiData SSD 128GB;
 WD 7,200RPM HD 1TB
Optical: 8x Buffalo Blu-ray/DVD/CD burner
Case: NZXT Rogue
PSU: NZXT 800W PSU
OS: Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit
Extras: Razer Lycosa keyboard and Razer DeathAdder mouse

VITALS ■ URL: WWW.IBUYPOWER.COM
 MSRP: \$2,249.00 CATEGORY: DREAM

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
Ibuypower LAN Warrior (\$2,249)	16834/20876	60 fps/24 fps	241 fps/206 fps	60 fps/45 fps	59 fps/59 fps
Gateway FX6800-05 (\$2,999)	18301/14986	42 fps/29 fps	230 fps/152 fps	56 fps/43 fps	60 fps/56 fps
Vigor Gaming T7N (\$2,499)	21296/32818	72 fps/30 fps	307 fps/282 fps	85 fps/69 fps	59 fps/59 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." Half-Life 2: Episode One run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. 1 in every 2000 children is born with webbed hands and/or feet.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

It's a great gaming system to take on the road with you, but the LAN Warrior's just as capable and lustworthy as any stay-at-home rig.



♦♦ EDITORS' CHOICE ♦♦

RAZER CARCHARIAS

FACE OF BASS

The Razer Carcharias are only the second pair of gaming headphones, after the Steel-Series 5Hv2, that are so comfortable I'd wear them to bed. I'd swing the mic up and away, tuck the braided cord and inline remote underneath my pillow so as not strangle myself accidentally in my sleep, and enjoy the soft caresses of the generously padded ear cups and headband as I slept. That is, until somebody hooked the cord up to a laptop, cranked the volume, and blasted me out of sleep and into the next galaxy with the Carcharias' bone-shattering bass.

Although definitely boosted in the low end, the dramatic sound of the Carcharias works well in games and movies, as well as music (for all but purists), but very quiet bass sounds seem gritty as they become louder. This isn't an issue for competitive gamers or MMO fans—those most likely to benefit from the bunny-slipper comfort of the cups after seven or eight hours of play. But they might not like the noise-canceling microphone, which neither flexes nor retracts as it does on the 5Hv2. Still, it's big sound for "mid" price. ☺

///Soft as an easy chair.///

VITALS ■ URL: WWW.RAZERZONE.COM MSRP: \$79.99
CATEGORY: MID

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **88%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

Q&A: Cool Cats

Q: Do you recommend a particular third-party VGA cooler for an ATI HD 4870 videocard? The stock cooler just isn't cutting it due to the hot weather I am experiencing. It gets hot in my room even without my PC turned on, and my pet cat seems to dislike the sound blasting out of the card. JOSE ESCOBAR

A: Beach weather can send temperatures inside your PC through the roof, turning the videocard into a weed-whacker until the system locks up or shuts down. But VGA coolers can be tricky to install, so I generally encourage folks to increase the airflow inside their cases instead by blowing out the dust, cleaning filters (if any), tying up cables, and even throwing in an inexpensive PCI slot cooler like Thermaltake's Cyclo Blue LED Slot Cooler

(\$8, www.xoxide.com) and positioning it next to your videocard.

But if your room bakes as much as mine does in the summer, this probably won't be adequate, so I'd recommend the Twin Turbo Quad Heatpipe cooler from Arctic Cooling (\$46.95, www.frozenscpu.com). It's a strong dual-fan cooler that isn't too loud. But if you really want rock-solid action at a LAN party out there in the desert with the Bedouins, I recommend the 4870 VGTA LC liquid cooler from

CoolIT (\$129.99, www.coolitsystems.com). This closed-loop system is easier to install than most other water-cooling kits, but still more challenging than air-cooling, and you'll want to make sure that your case has a 92mm or 120mm rear fan exhaust.

You can even liquid-cool your cat by adding water to the iCool Pet Mat (\$25, www.trixieandpeanut.com). Now everybody's happy. ☺



/// Small fry. ///

HARD STUFF TRINITY

↔ DREAM SYSTEM

CASE AND PSU COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	\$400
PROCESSOR INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	\$990
MOTHERBOARD ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	\$292
MEMORY CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	\$92
OPTICAL DRIVE LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY	\$110
HARD DRIVE INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	\$492
SOUNDCARD CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	\$107
VIDEOCARDS GEFORCE GTX 295	\$499

\$2,982

↔ MID-RANGE

CASE AND PSU NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 850W PSU	\$230
PROCESSOR INTEL CORE i7-940	\$550
MOTHERBOARD ASUS P6T	\$242
MEMORY CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	\$61
OPTICAL DRIVE LITE-ON DH-52C2P	\$25
HARD DRIVE WD 500GB 7200RPM	\$65
SOUNDCARD ONBOARD	\$0
VIDEOCARD GEFORCE GTX 280	\$343

\$1,516

↔ ENTRY-LEVEL

CASE AND PSU GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	\$135
PROCESSOR AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	\$80
MOTHERBOARD ASUS M2N-MX	\$49
MEMORY CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	\$20
OPTICAL DRIVE LITE-ON DH-52C2P	\$25
HARD DRIVE WD 250GB 7200RPM	\$59
SOUNDCARD ONBOARD	\$0
VIDEOCARD GEFORCE 8800 GT	\$85

\$453

THE MECHROMANCER

Blizzard's April Fool's gag for *Diablo III* unveiled the Archivist, a scroll-loving librarian that hurls books at Satan's minions. Two can play at that game, Blizz. While there's still room on the character selection screen, consider our suggestion: The Mechromancer.

MECH LORE

Last remnants of a guild of mechanical mages long forgotten, then remembered, daydreamt about that one time in the shower, scribbled on your notebook during biology class, then forgotten once more. Mechromancers crawl *Diablo's* depths to salvage the remains of their fallen brethren.

CLASS FEATURES

REALLY COOL

65 tons, 22.4 meters high, wrapped in a weave of ferro-fibrous armor, and generally unlike anything you've ever seen in a subterranean hell-dungeon. He is known by many names: Caster of Non-Magic Missiles, Jumper of Jets, Autocannons-For-Arms, and One Who Has Full Use Of The Giant Biped/Carpool Lane.

MECH ROMANCE ♥

Not to be associated with the other schools of -mancy (like crithomancy, a practice of divination through cereal grains), mechs are literally the subject of a Mechromancer's sweaty adoration. If mechs ever played an electric guitar solo at a live concert, Mechromancers would totally lift their shirts and scream something inappropriate.

GENERIC CALLSIGN

At age 13, a Mechromancer formally adopts his B-movie persona, signified with a throwaway moniker like "Hollywood," "Ace," or "Iceman." As a bonus trait, Mechromancers are fluent in Catchphrasian—a full two-thirds of their vocabulary is dedicated to phrases like "Stay on target..." and "Pull up!" applied liberally to everyday situations that make trips to the supermarket seem like a *Wing Commander* mission with an unusual amount of coupons.



ABILITIES

GAUSS RIFLE *Projectile*

As rifles go, this one's pretty good. Hey, I need it next Tuesday.

Electromagnetically accelerated artillery that punches through reanimated corpses like a hot bowling ball through pins made of butter. The arcane knowledge needed to forge a gauss rifle was long lost, so Mechromancers have to share just the one, handing it down between generations like a very dangerous sweater.

FIRE EVERYTHING, DAMMIT! *Pew pew*

With great tactical insight, you fire everything.

Villages get pillaged every day. Where's YOUR village *right now*? Maybe it's dead. Apply this classic technique whenever peasantry is threatened, known to famed Mechhistorians as the Alpha Strike.

EJECT! *Mash a glass-encased button*

I'll get you next time, Lord of Terror! Oh sh%&, is that a chandelier?

A timeless method of escape, made obsolete by the advanced technology of ceilings. If you're gonna go critical, do it outside.

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